COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

Lariat

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STORY MAGAZINE

SEPT. 20c

"THE ROMANCE OF THE WEST—WRITTEN WITH ACTION"

SIX-GUN STRANGER FROM CHEROKEE

A QUIET, SOFT-SPOKEN COWBOY DRIFTS INTO A BITTER RANGE WAR

by ROLLIN BROWN

GUN-PLAY GAMBLE

by 'GENE CUNNINGHAM

★

SADDLE-BUM

by BART CASSIDY

HELL-CAT OF THE BITTER-RIVER RANGE

A WILD, LAWLESS LAND—AND AN OUTLAW GIRL WHO RODE AND SHOT AND FOUGHT LIKE A MAN

by WALT COBURN

★

SATAN'S SEGUNDO

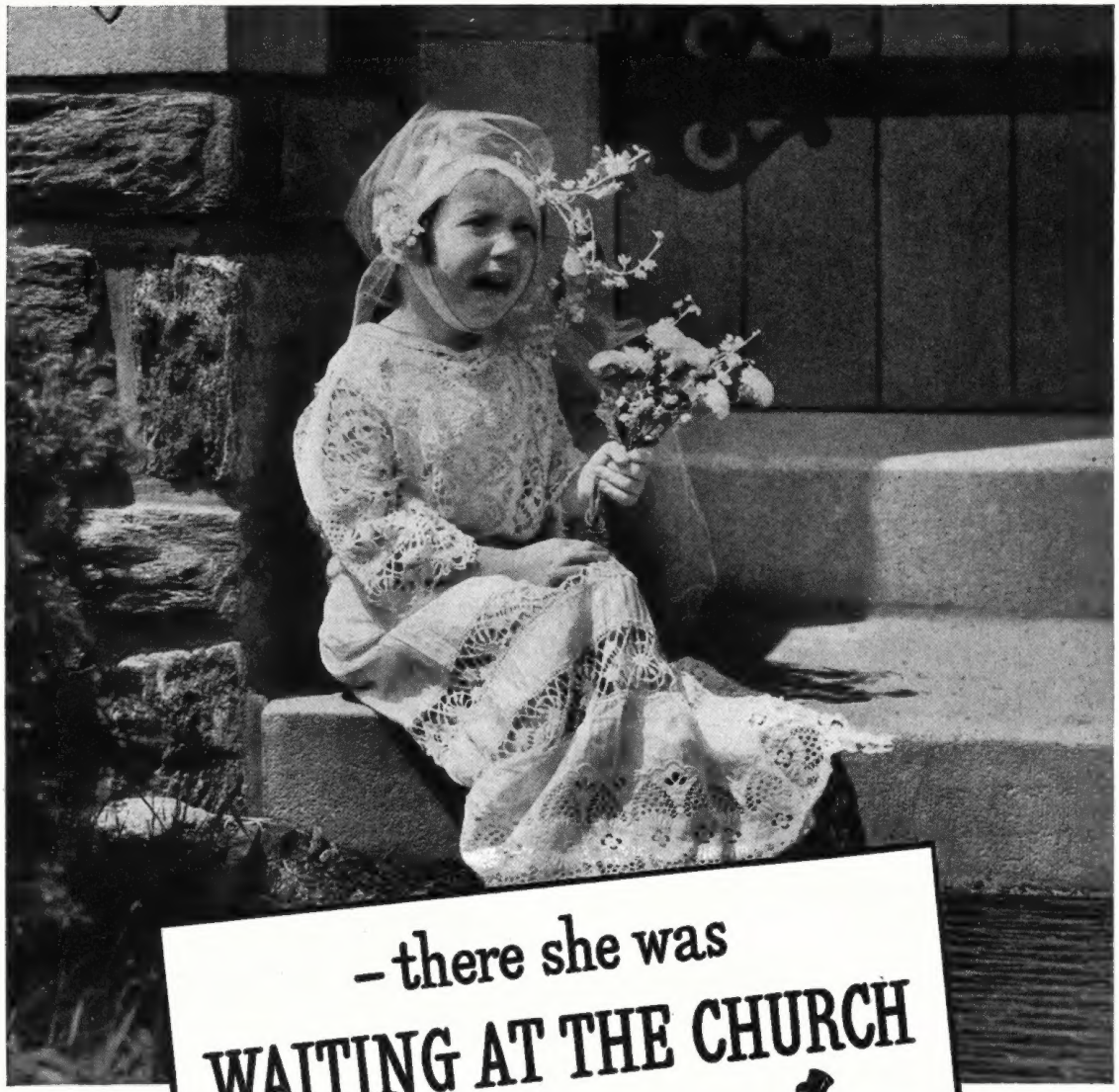
by BUCK STRADLEIGH

★

TINHORN!

by JOHN STARR

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES



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STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

A COMPLETE RANGELAND NOVELET

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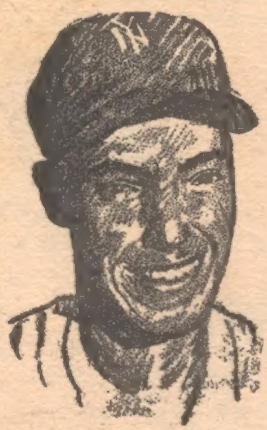

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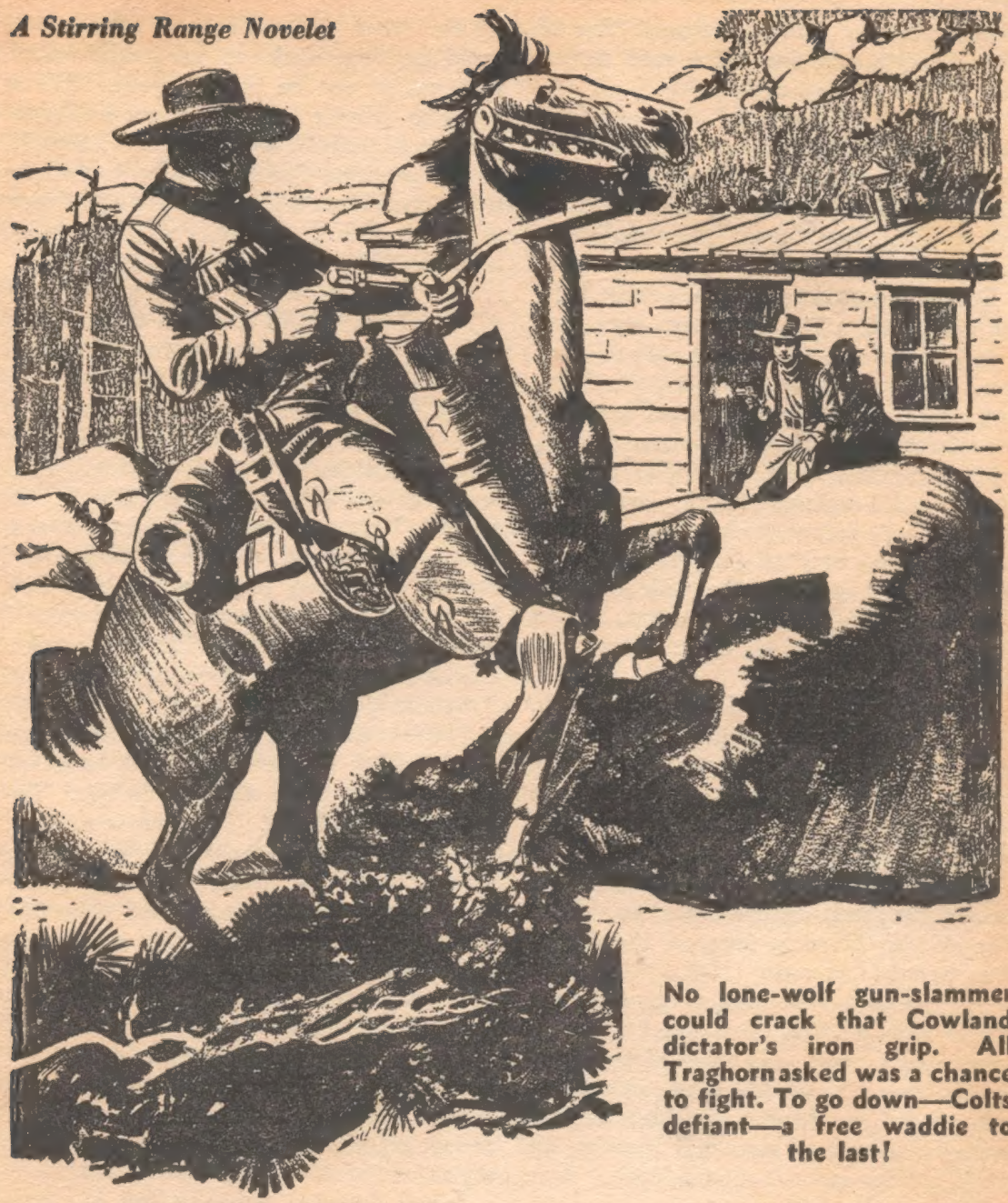


No lone-wolf gun-slammer could crack that Cowland dictator's iron grip. All Traghorn asked was a chance to fight. To go down—Colts defiant—a free waddie to the last!

Sixgun Stranger from Cherokee

By ROLLIN BROWN

JEFF TRAGHORN watched all this with gray, speculative eyes. Dusty, salt-streaked horses stood along the racks of the street, and now a group of twenty or more riders had congregated in front of the Alamo Bar, Oran Flood men among them. He watched ten Thorpe Mantone riders swing in across the open stretch north of town in a body, leaving a dun-red streak of dust across the land, and come abreast the O. K. Corrals in a close-spaced knot, slowed to a steady jog. Gaunt and angular-looking, Oran Flood left a doorway and now came up the street the other way with long, loose-

jointed strides. Across corners, Sheriff John Barrett quit his office and moved toward Kernan Hall deliberately.

Somewhere a rider said, "Mantone's key-man. Whichever way he throws his strength will decide the issue. Barrett or his brother won't matter so much. They are out of it. You'll see." He wasn't talking to Jeff Traghorn.

Thorpe Mantone swung loose at the Kernan Hall rack, a big, square-set man with a dark, heavy face and pale, close-lidded eyes. Across heads of the crowd, Mantone's eyes met those of Oran Flood and some definite message passed between them, although neither spoke. All this made a pattern Jeff Traghorn knew by heart. He had seen it all before, back in the Cherokee country. He watched Thorpe Mantone climb wooden steps to the wide door of Kernan Hall, followed by his men. Oran Flood riders began to move across the street.

A hand touched Jeff Traghorn's elbow. Sheriff John Barrett stopped beside him and said without friendliness, "Clay just rode in and is puttin' up his horse over in the yard behind my office. He wants to see you, Traghorn."

Jeff Traghorn said, "All right." He crossed the street against the loose tide of men shifting from in front of the Alamo Bar toward Kernan Hall. Traghorn could have told the whole story, what was coming now, whether it happened today, tomorrow, or a year. No expression showed on his face. Only his gray, calculating eyes missed no detail. Traghorn walked through the narrow space left between the sheriff's office and the square-fronted store building on the right.

A lean, straight-shouldered man had just forked a bait of hay over bars into feed rack in the small corral lot behind, where two sweat-damp, saddled horses stood. He turned a drawn, sunburned face and looked at Traghorn with eyes that showed the mark of a sleepless night asaddle, cuffing back the roll-brim Stetson on his head. This was Clay Barrett, Sheriff John Barrett's brother. Jeff Traghorn did not immediately look at the second rider, waiting, saving this.

Barrett said, "I had a man through South Pass early last evenin' and headed back across with him. Nothin's changed over on the other side. There at dawn, you could see three flocks of 'em gettin' under way, takin' up the march again. Three wagons. Maybe a dozen riders and men afoot. If nothin' stops 'em now, there'll be sheep across South Pass no later than tomorrow. There'll be sheep along the head of Ronde Crick. As many as eight thousand head!"

CLAY BARRETT stared across back alleys of the town toward that far, irregular wall of land, the flat notch of South Pass against the hills, the crease of Ronde Creek leading up into top draws and a rough multitude of head ravines. This was Barrett Block Bar range, along Ronde Creek. Mantone rode west and north, and Oran Flood stood estanched among the serried knobs and buttes and inter-valley bottoms on the other hand. Small knots of muscle stood out on Clay Barrett's cheeks. His eyes swung back to the stony gray of Traghorn's eyes again.

"Jeff, I want you back at the Butte line shack," Clay Barrett said. "I'll have another rider up there with you tonight. Tomorrow at the latest. This is cow country. There's never been a woolly crossed those hills. We've got cattle here—too many head crowdin' the range as it is! Mantone brought in three thousand head in one trail drive this spring. It's meant line riders to save what grass Block Bar has got to have along Ronde Crick, with Flood pushin' on the other side. But you know all of that. There ain't range enough, there ain't grass enough for sheep. Whatever else has happened before, now cowmen got to stick together!"

It was the same, it was always the same, nothing ever changed. This might have been a re-living of that other time. The men were no different, the parts they played were not changed, their speech was the same.

The scene was different, Jeff Traghorn thought. But where these hills stood he could see another range. The basin there had been a broad grass valley, called the Cherokee. That had been two years ago, lacking a month or so. The pattern was the same. Jeff Traghorn had known all this before.

He said, "I'll be on my way. Flood's been in town an hour or so, and Mantone

just rode in. The meeting's been called in Kernan Hall."

For a moment something else glowed behind the gray, stony surfaces of Jeff Traghorn's eyes. He could have told now what the outcome of that meeting was going to be. But he said no more.

Clay Barrett was coming around the corral, to where the other rider with him now stood—and finally Jeff Traghorn looked at her. He liked to see Tonia Barrett last of all when he rode away, whether the meeting was here by chance or on one of his infrequent visits to the Block Bar home quarters. They had never spoken more than a dozen words since Traghorn had been riding for Block Bar. But there was some warm quality in the girl's dark eyes that Jeff Traghorn could take with him and so remember, a loveliness utterly foreign to the hard, brutal facts of his own life.

She stood beside her brother now in a fringed doeskin riding skirt, high-heeled boots and a small man's shirt, open at her throat—slim and straight-backed as were all the Barretts, her head just slightly higher than Clay's shoulder.

Traghorn said, gently, "Mornin', ma'am."

She answered with her eyes, a little smile, and then went on with Clay Barrett toward the street and that meeting of Kernan Basin cow-owners and their riders in the hall. Jeff Traghorn watched them disappear. He turned abruptly then, walked into the alleyway behind, and moved west till he came out at a hitch-rack around the first side-street corner. This town was full of idle, waiting horses and men. Traghorn untied a leggy iron-roan from the rail, swung the animal sidewise by the bit and pulled slack from the cinch with one hand.

Just behind him on the street-edge walk, a deep-throated voice said, casually, "Howdy, Trag. One way and another, I wouldn't have been expectin' to see you here."

Only Traghorn's eyes moved, suddenly; there was no perceptible stiffening in him. He finished tucking the end of cinch latigo into knot, dropped stirrup back. When he came around, it was without haste. No hint of surprise showed behind the gray wall of his eyes, although it had been months since he had last seen this man. The pattern never changed, nothing altered.

Traghorn nodded, said, "The same, Dunn." He waited for the other to go on.

Dunn Bowman grinned a little, a ruddy, heavy-chested man with big, bony hands. He took tobacco sack from pocket, spilled flakes into a brown paper. "Been quite a spell of time, since back yonder in the Cherokee," Dunn Bowman continued. He wore a single gun, swung low at hip. His eyes watched Traghorn across the cupped flame of a match. "But I reckon signs stack up a good deal the same, at that. Maybe you noticed. Some ways, Trag, I'm hopin' you got sense enough to pick the right side here."

"What side is that?"

DUNN BOWMAN looked at the burning point of his cigarette. "Mantone hired me a week or so ago, over at Mesa Wells," he said. "He passed out a little money. I'm hirin' a few boys myself."

"Anything else, Dunn?"

"All right," Dunn Bowman said. "Go your own way. I seen you, Trag. Just thought I'd mention it for old time's sake. The Cherokee busted you. This might be as bad an' worse. S'long."

Jeff Traghorn forked leg over the roan's saddle, and moved out of town. Thorpe Mantone was hiring from twelve to fifteen riders on Spur Hook, annexing land by use and control of scattered springs and dry gully tanks, west and north. East of Ronde Creek in the hills and buttes, Oran Flood kept eight or ten hands on steady payroll. And now Mantone was adding to his strength with outside men—fighting men, gunhands. It was a breed Jeff Traghorn knew, as he knew Dunn Bowman from those other days on the Cherokee.

Whatever hopes he had had in the past were done, lost there in the Cherokee Valley, where two outfits had gone down to ruin, carrying a dozen lesser figures, and in the end three-quarters of a million acres of land had been wrested under control of one iron. In Jeff Traghorn only experience was left, and the hard calculating ability to judge things for their essentials, and so fight more efficiently for nothing of his own—but for hire. In this respect he and Dunn Bowman were no different. Both were hired fighting guns.

He thought of Clay Barrett's parting

words, "There ain't range enough, there ain't grass enough for sheep. Whatever else has happened, now cowmen got to stick together!" Jeff Traghorn shook his head.

"No, it won't happen that way," he said, and knew this certainly now.

The land fell back under the roan's long-striding hoofs. Traghorn took up the gradual swell, climbing toward South Pass at a steady jog. Off on his right, a small flag of dust blossomed across the low streak of alkali flat that was no man's land, fit for no grazing. But here the main, deep-rutted road that led to Mesa Wells and the outside, a hard day's travel away, was deserted. Higher, toward noontime, Traghorn could look back across the basin. He paused awhile, studying the tiny-distant blocks of the town he had left.

A hazy thin line of dust receded north along the road to Mantone's, already well out of town. Shortly he could make out riders coming the other way, toward lower Ronde Creek. The meeting in Kernan Hall hadn't lasted long. But there was no curiosity in Jeff Traghorn's gaze. He simply looked, remembered what he saw, and then rode on, knowing exactly what it meant.

This was upper country, fringed with piñon and juniper clumps. The soil was gravelly red. Traghorn left the road and bore toward the east, striking into roughs, working higher. Eroded side gullies intervened. Once he paused and studied a fresh shod track.

Red-sided buttes showed out through scattered timber. The overhead sun had declined an hour. He dropped into a swale, splashed through a tiny, running stream and circled the pocket meadow opening beyond. From here the flat notch of the pass lay off on the right. There was a small corral back along the brush, where Traghorn left the roan, still saddled. The Butte line camp was a one-room log shack with a lean-to shake shed at one end.

Traghorn stood within two paces of the shack's door before he saw a broad, hob-nailed heelprint in the dust. He stepped into the door. A brown, thick-set man was backed toward him, holding a kerosene can tilted so that a trickle sloshed over fuel box by the cold stove and walls. A long-barreled rifle stood leaned just inside the door; and the other had paused here long enough to open and eat two cans of peaches from the lean-to storeroom. The empty cans stood on the table with a spoon left in one.

Traghorn kicked the rifle so it fell to floor. The other whirled, blinking black, beady eyes, his mouth hung half open. His face was broad, heavy-jawed, sparse dark stubble on cheeks and jaw. He dropped the can of oil into the fuel box, standing undecided whether to rush or hold his ground.

Traghorn shook his head. "Don't do it! A hungry man is welcome to what grub he needs in a line camp like this. But we have notions it ain't proper to burn the shack when he leaves. Sheep, is it?"

The black, beady eyes continued to blink. "Yah, we bring some sheep. Dis good sheep country."

"Fair," Traghorn admitted. "Whose sheep?"

This was the same old story, nothing about it changed.

The brown, thick-set man took a tentative step forward, his eyes fixed on that rifle on the floor. Traghorn had not pulled a gun. The smooth, blued-steel hung in its sheath at his thigh. He could have drawn and put the five shots under hammer into a space no larger than the surface of a Spanish playing card at this distance, before the other could have reached the door wall. One thing Jeff Traghorn had brought from the Cherokee with him—a cool ability to judge an issue, and a seasoned, deadly gun-skill. It was the only thing.

He said again, "Whose sheep? Come out through the door here where I can get a better look at you."

The other studied him under thick brows. He came on sullenly, shoulders hunched. A pace from the open door, he paused, still thinking about the rifle. His eyes lifted. Backing outside, Traghorn gestured impatiently. Then he saw some change come into those lifted, beady eyes, a glinting flash. There was that much warning.

THE brown, thick-set herder dropped in the doorway. Simultaneously splinters ridged up from an outside log even with Traghorn's shoulders.

He threw himself around, took one step

that brought him back against the outer wall, the sound of that shot smashing into a roar across the clearing. Against brush beyond, a puff of rifle smoke dissolved. A man stood there, jacking rifle lever. Another had just left a group of three horses deeper in the brush and was running across the other way, to quarter in on the cabin. Some cold, deliberate part of Jeff Traghorn's mind was asking, "So soon as this?" —while his gun hand moved in an automatic action.

The gun kicked, steadied, kicked again, the whole roar of it spreading into echoes of that first hard-smashed shot, ripping apart silence off into the buttes and down slopes into the pass. Somewhere a second rifle opened.

Traghorn swung on bent knees. The big, thick-set herder, crawling, had just reached the rifle. He was turning, coming up into the doorway when Traghorn hit him with one shoulder. The Colts in his hand chopped with a side-swung blow that caught the herder on the side of the skull. The herder toppled, big and ungainly, and went down across the doorsill. Some awful blow exploded in Traghorn's left thigh that same instant.

It slewed him half-around, the leg crumpled under him. Fire-hot stabs of pain burst blindingly across his eyeballs. He hit the floor, tried to crawl. He had lost the Colts. Still that cool, deliberate part of his brain kept count of time, urging him desperately. One contracting hand discovered the stock of the herder's rifle under him.

He hitched himself around. The man running in across the clearing had stopped. He was yelling now, "You, Nelse—get out of there! Get away!" His six-gun started hammering. The big, thick-set herder muttered, groaned, and must have dimly comprehended. His heavy, hobbed boots dragged out over the doorsill. Lead lowered instantly.

Traghorn crawled a step—a single pace for a strong man, but an everlasting distance on one knee and hands. Lead bit across the muscles of one shoulder. The man out there was firing at less than fifty paces. Traghorn pulled himself against one casement. The rifle steadied up. He fired. He could hear the herder getting up outside, running lurchingly alongside the cabin. Farther rifle shots crashed loose again.

The man at fifty yards had doubled up in the middle. He leaned far over like a tight-rope walker on a line, toppled, suddenly limp in every muscle. Traghorn waited. His leg had left a smeared path of blood across the floor. He saw his Colts gun now, thrown out into the middle of the room when he fell. He worked the rifle up again, firing as fast as he could jack fresh shells into barrel. The rifleman across clearing took cover.

Traghorn crawled toward his Colts, still dragging the rifle with one or two shells left in magazine. Fire from the clearing's edge had ceased. Then a single wild-flung bullet clipped the high edge of casement and whanged across into the far log wall. Traghorn reached his six-gun. There was a glassless window in the rear of the shack. He kept on crawling till he came against the wall. His leg was numb from the hip down. Beads of icy sweat congealed across his forehead.

He stood on one leg beside the window, fearing rear attack. He saw two riders circling the clearing now, well back in the brush. One led a third horse. Beyond sight in cover, the two paused. He heard a voice, off there, call, "Nelse! Hey, Nelse!"

The big, thick-set herder crossed a nearer opening with loose, ungainly strides. There was no further shot. In a moment Traghorn saw the three cut out across higher, farther land, riding urgently. He crossed the shack to the door once more. They didn't know how bad hit he was; the horses tethered across clearing were gone. Still the pattern hadn't changed; Traghorn had seen all this before. He inched his way to a bench.

He cut the left leg of his trouser from hip to boot, slit it into strips and twisted the strips into a tourniquet about his thigh. Dizziness took him then. The world turned black. Somewhere in dim memory, Traghorn clawed for the water pail. The pail was empty. He crawled toward the door. But the next clear knowledge he had of this, he was standing braced against the outside wall of the cabin, holding himself up against the logs.

Somehow Jeff Traghorn crossed that space toward the corral. He never knew

how he got up into the roan's saddle. But now a long while had passed, for the sun was big and yellow over the west horizon of the Mantone hills. Shadows filled draws and ravines of the land, thickened. He was riding down the Ronde Creek trail. The roan had its head and often stopped to graze. But all the power and will in Jeff Traghorn's body was knotted in the strength of his two hands on saddlehorn. He was nearly done—and knew it.

The roan shied suddenly. He toppled headlong, and fell. . . . He heard other hoofs, without strength in him now to lift his head. It was dark and then a match flared, close before his eyes.

A voice that he knew said, *"Here! It's Traghorn . . .!* Has one of you got a flask?"

II

THE liquor dribbled between Traghorn's lips. He coughed, choked, and slow-burning fire ran down his throat. Clay Barrett's voice continued, "One of you boys strike up a fire of brush stems. We got to have a light. He's been hit bad. . . ."

Brush crackled and snapped in a rider's hands. A flame licked up out of the dark. Horses stamped.

"Get water, somebody, in a hat! And two of you line up trail a ways; no tellin' what this light will draw . . . Tonia!"

The girl's voice was softly husky, close. "I'm right here, Clay. Bring the water first."

Jeff Traghorn could tell the difference between their hands. Hers were as firm, but gentler. Hoofs hit out along the up-trail, faded.

Somewhere a rider was saying now, "They deserted wagons up the pass. That's the move nobody expected. Loaded outfits on the team mules and swung that first flock eastward into the brush and roughs, men afoot on the flanks and front, out-riders scoutin' down the hills ahead. The rest come on behind—eight thousand head of woollies. Whatever this outfit is, it's headed for the basin. It's had help from the inside here. Stack up the cards that way. Figure it out, what do you get?

"Me, I noticed four-five strangers around town this mornin', all of 'em wearin' guns, ridin' Mantone hosses. Take the stand Thorpe Mantone made in the meetin'. Mantone calculates to protect his own—no more; he made it plain enough. Flood followed his lead, even weaker. You seen the way Flood quit that meetin'. All of us did. Yesterday both Thorpe Mantone and Oran Flood was runnin' cows in the basin. But today one of 'em has switched sides to somethin' different—sheep! The other, in so many words, has promised hands off. Ronde Creek lies in between. No, not yesterday; this thing ain't happened overnight."

"Cut the gab!" Clay Barrett counseled. "Right now, there are some other things to think of."

The girl's soft-voiced words interrupted, "Clay, we can't do anything. We've got to get him to a doctor. Maybe a doctor—a good one, Clay—could save him, could save this leg. If it wasn't too long."

"Kid, you're cryin'," Clay Barrett said. "Quit it! We'll do the best we can—"

Then from darkness up the trail other hoofs beat for a moment plain and died, striking up once more around some nearer bend of the land. They heard one of the two riders sent ahead challenge suddenly. A voice answered, "That's all right. It's Clay I want to see."

Standing over Traghorn, Clay Barrett said, "That's John comin' down trail. He'll know the rest of it!"

Sheriff John Barrett swung from saddle on the edge of the fire's glow. For a moment he stood there, his eyes shifting from Traghorn's prone form to his brother's face, to the loose knot of Black Bar riders and the girl, back to Traghorn again. Sheriff John Barrett was a stiff man. Cattle interests had put him in office. A third owner with Clay Barrett and his sister in Block Bar, John Barrett hadn't needed the job, but the basin had needed his sort of man in the saddle. He had pushed through three tough years of it here, warring against running irons, edge-land rustlers and the hard-eyed breed of drifters that came through the pass, seeking refuge across county lines.

His record was beyond reproach. John Barrett could ride with any posseman that ever straddled saddle, and it was his way always to be in the lead, when moving into trouble. He was fearless. But he was no politician. He couldn't mix and fraternize

with groups around the town and bars. He couldn't slap backs and call enemies his friends to win votes and favor. What John Barrett was, he was—a stiff and resolute man, blunt, at once respected thoroughly and in some quarters as thoroughly hated.

HE stopped over Traghorn with a stiff gesture. "I warned you when you hired this man, Clay," he said. "What he was, was written all too plainly on him. I told you then that we had no need for a gun-fighter on Block Bar and would never have. Now he's killed one of Oran Flood's hands up in the clearing at the Butte shack."

The talkative rider in the group said, "Then it's Flood behind them sheep! I'd reckon that's all we need to know. Let's go!"

John Barrett looked at the rider for half a moment long. He said, "Another thing we're not needing on Ronde Creek right now is hot-heads. When we get back to the ranch, ask Clay to make out your time."

He turned to his brother again. "Yes, it's Flood," John Barrett said. "I met Flood in the pass a while ago. He's in the open now, claims he'd have had a war on his hands before sheep ever reached his edge country if his plans had been known earlier. Somebody's talked Flood into this. He's got his head full of figures and the profit sheep have made elsewhere. Figures sheep on that rough ridge land and his stony bottom country will pay as much again as he's been able to make from cattle. And he might be right—I wouldn't know. Flood's sellin' out his cattle. We crossed to the Butte line shack together. I had a couple of men."

The two rode in just now, following down trail, and dismounted. But against the glow of fire, Clay Barrett paid no heed. He was staring at this square, straight-set figure of the sheriff, who was his brother, as though he hardly knew the man, or as though he, too, suddenly hated that blunt, stiff quality in John Barrett.

"John," Clay Barrett said, "you talk like Flood had got to you. Like you were siding with him. Like you'd forgotten your own flesh and blood and your own share of Ronde Creek!"

"When a man goes into public office, Clay, he ceases to take sides," John Barrett said. "He's got no sides of his own, not if he's a decent sheriff! Your vote, among others, put me in that office. You were glad enough about it at the time, as were most of the others. Remember that, Clay, because I won't repeat it!"

He gestured to Traghorn. "What were you planning to do for him just now?"

Clay answered in a strained, unnatural voice, "He's got to have a doctor—if he lives. That ought to be plain."

"I'll see to the doctor," John Barrett answered, "and have him waiting. Flood made charge against Traghorn at the Butte shack. He'll have the best that I can give him. But he goes into jail, pending whatever action Flood decides to push. I told you one of Flood's riders had been killed. There's no law in this country against any man bringin' in sheep to graze his land, if he so chooses. But there is a law against killing."

John Barrett turned to his horse. "Get this crew of yours back home, Clay. Particularly see that Tonia stays right there. I'll be waiting for you in town."

He swung to the saddle. The two riders with him, one a homesteader on the fringe of Mantone country, and the other a town boy, both deputized tonight, trotted past and were gone down the Ronde Creek trail.

"Clay!" the girl whispered. Traghorn could see the play of firelight across her features, the deep, somber look in her eyes.

Clay Barrett said, slowly, "I've been with John, been as close to him as two brothers generally are, for nearly thirty years. I remember the way Dad licked him once for shieldin' me in a lie. He never told. But somehow—somehow I never knew John till tonight!"

He whirled on one of the riders. "What time you got, Ed?"

"Eight, by my watch," the rider named Ed Johnson told him. "A few minutes after."

"That night stage out to Mesa Wells don't leave town till half-past," Clay snapped. "It'll be ten 'fore it's in the pass. We got time to carry Traghorn across, put him aboard there. Ten miles and he'll be out of the country, over the county line. You go with him, Ed."

He was leaning over Traghorn. "Best

I can do. Sorry. Want another drink?"

Back in the Cherokee, Traghorn had ridden on the law-and-order side. He had been a deputy at the start of trouble. He had moved with ten others, armed with rifles and shotguns, protecting the first gray woolly flood of sheep that came up the Cherokee Valley, because court order established their right there. He had been one of deputies to later fire on those same flocks, trespassing across other lines without right. Everything of his own had been lost and destroyed in that range war. But he had left the Cherokee before he ever knew that sheep or cows, or grass, or the plow, or water rights were only pawns by which men moved and played this game. Back of everything it was men that mattered, the men behind the play. . . .

HE was out of his head, fever pounding through his brain, when eight riders of them stopped the Mesa Wells stage on the dark up-climb of the grade. There was no shotgun messenger riding the box tonight, no valuables aboard. The driver looped ribbons on the brake bar, climbed down. He took a look.

"Yeh. Yeh," he muttered, "they's a hull seat inside on which he kin lay. Naw, naw, I don't mind—if these-hyar two other passengers ain't ticklish about ridin' in with a corpse, the looks of him. Yeh, I'll git a canteen."

Jeff Traghorn remembered none of this. But later there was a round-faced man with a short, pointed beard and steel-rimmed spectacles bending over him.

"Tough!" the doctor said. He was probing Traghorn's chest. "Two other wounds in here—old wounds. God knows what this man has been through somewhere else. Young, maybe twenty-four or -five. What's worth fighting for like that? I wish I knew. Home—range—cattle? Yes, men have always fought to have and to hold those things, back as far as history. Or in this case, was it seventy-five dollars a month, a gun and ammunition?"

That was four days later—days mostly lost in Traghorn's memory. His leg lay propped out stiff on a clean white cot in the railroad hospital at Mesa Wells. Traghorn smiled a little, twistedly.

"In this case, it was forty dollars a month and found," he said. "Outfits hadn't generally started payin' gunhand wages in the Kernan Basin yet. That will come later."

"Whoever was paying your bills here wanted the best we had," the doctor remarked drily. "He said his name was Ed."

"Ed Johnson," Traghorn said. "One of Clay Barrett's riders."

But it was three weeks before Ed Johnson came back again to Mesa Wells on Block Bar business for Clay Barrett, riding a leggy, spent sorrel that he put in the stage stable corrals just after dark. Word had come out of the Kernan by then. In sketchy accounts the weekly newspaper at Mesa Wells published it. Sheep were grazing upper Ronde Creek under armed guard. Flood disputed range boundaries of the Barretts' south and east lines, and riders in the pay of Flood and Clay Barrett had clashed openly twice. In the sheriff's office, John Barrett had been accused of favoritism, and a growing force of opposition to the sheriff was forming in the Kernan Basin, led by a newcomer in the town named Dunn Bowman.

"John Barrett's present term of office keeps him in the saddle for another month an' a little more," Ed Johnson told Traghorn. "But election day, to see whether he'll serve a second term or not, is less'n a week off. There's been all kinds of talk circulated against him. He's blamed for the move Clay made that night, gettin' you out through South Pass and across the county line. Other things. The real issue ain't mentioned. John Barrett's square. Too square, too straight, for anybody's good. While this Dunn Bowman has a lot of money to spend around town. Money can make a man popular for a while. Bowman is after the sheriffin' job."

Jeff Traghorn thought of that big-chested, ruddy man with the large, bony hands, standing back from a hitch-rail in Kernan town, the morning he had ridden for the Butte line shack. "Howdy, Trag. . . . I'm hopin' you got sense enough to pick the right side here," Bowman had said.

Yes, he knew Dunn Bowman.

Traghorn said nothing now. He watched Ed Johnson, sitting there in one of the hospital's visiting chairs, the light of a lamp thrown across his hawkish, dusty face, a stringy, muscular little man. Ed

Johnson continued, "We been losin' stock. Not a few head that might have been rustled for local beef, but two-three hundred at a shot. With other things, nobody's been ridin' boundaries on Mantone's side or across the alkali. Clay should have drove beef ten days or two weeks ago. But now we find where we'd run seven-eight hundred head market steers into fat grass along the basin there ain't maybe more'n half that many left. That's why I'm here in town—after men. We got to have more of a crew, more men. It's shovin' Clay under after ready money."

Ed Johnson rose to go. "Sure fine to see you up an' about like this, Traghorn. Even if they are still keepin' you on a crutch. Clay wanted me to stop an' see."

"I'm quittin' the hospital tomorrow," Traghorn said.

He hobbled to the door of this white-painted building across from the Mesa Wells railroad yards beside Johnson. A street ran parallel with the railyard and track, dark-windowed stores and lighted saloon fronts lining its far side. Up the block and across a side street corner, the brick hulk of the Drovers & Merchants Bank stood out more solidly against the night under the glow of a dull corner street lamp.

"Clay want me back?"

Ed Johnson had turned to answer when the muffled jar of an explosion rattled windows along the street. Traghorn had been looking directly toward the bank and saw the spit of red-white flash outlining a side window. Immediately saloons and gambling-house doors began to disgorge men.

At the corner, two guns opened, beating a steady tattoo against board fronts and along the walks, smashing out glass windows. The dull corner lamp went out first—not before Traghorn saw a man break his way from that side window of the bank, as the quickest means of exit, legs dangling when darkness hit. From there, a third gun opened east along the street. Two riders were running horses up.

NOT six shots fired against them, five men in a group hit saddle and raced horses across the open space of the railyards, quartering toward the station building to escape the run of lead along street. There the unexpected intervened. The Mesa Wells town marshal and a deputy, fully armed, had been waiting in the station for the evening train, the deputy with a handcuffed prisoner for the Yuma Prison. It took half a moment to unsnap cuffs and chain the prisoner to a waiting-room bench.

The marshal, coming from the station at a run, opened fire. Three of the men taking part in the blowing of the Drovers & Merchants Bank had emptied out their guns along the street, without time now to reload. The deputy started shooting from the station's corner. The headlong rush of the getaway checked, spurred horses swerved off at the other angle across railyards. One of the outlaws had got loose a rifle from saddle scabbard and joined fire over-shoulder beside the two riders still carrying full six-guns. Fifty yards in front of the railroad hospital, one of the men went out of saddle.

Dust welled up out of the night. The marshal and deputy were following afoot across yards. The four remaining riders and the running horse with an empty saddle struck into the street west. Men were running from every direction before the sound of hoofs faded. A match flared in the marshal's hands.

He said, "Don't know him!" leaning over the fallen man.

The marshal rose, cupped hands to mouth. "Anybody that can take saddle with a posse meet over at the stage corrals," he bellowed across yards and the town. "If you got a horse here on the street, so much the better. Pronto, now!"

The outlaw was a scarred, middle-aged man with a shock of coal black hair that fell back from brows, as he was carried into the hospital. There might have been a strain of Mexican or Indian blood in him. In the flare of light from a doorway, Ed Johnson parted abruptly from the crowd. Traghorn had hobbled aside awkwardly on his crutch, to escape the push of men crowding in. Johnson took hold of his arm with taut, biting fingers.

"I seen him twice before," Johnson said. "Alive! Back in the basin—with Bowman!"

Nothing on Traghorn's face showed any change of expression. He said, "Don't get things mixed up, Ed. Once, two

years ago, I made that mistake. Right now, this looks like a battle over sheep range and cattle in the basin. But it won't be that way in the end. It's a law-and-order fight! Every section of the country has had to face it some time. That's the way things stack up in the Kernan. Tell Clay if he wants me back to send word out here."

Half an hour later Ed Johnson got together three of five riders he had hired in Mesa Wells tonight—a dull, chunky Indian boy, a gray-haired old-timer with stooped shoulders, and an eager, smooth-faced youngster without experience—and started back for the Kernan, while a posse rode out of town west. No word from Clay Barrett followed.

A morning, six days later, the dust-covered night stage across South Pass came into Mesa Wells at a lope, the same knotty driver that had carried Traghorn, that other night, on the box. He carried news from the Kernan, whipping his team into the stage corrals, throwing reins to a hostler.

"Yeh. Yeh, John Barrett's out. Bowman beat him anyhow two to one in the election count. That much was plain early yesterday afternoon, although it leaves John Barrett some thirty days till his old term expires. An' he'll have use for it, seems like. Clay, his brother, got prodded into a gun-fight on the street later in the day. Pretty bad hurt. T'other man made a clean git-away, leavin' Clay where he fell!"

Traghorn, listening, turned to a stableman. "I'm goin' to want a horse," he said.

The stableman eyed him. "You come in here a Block Bar hand that had been hurt," he recollected. "Three-four weeks ago."

"That's right," Traghorn nodded.

"Ed Johnson left a big blaze-face sorrel here with us, last time he was in town. He needed a fresh horse on his way back. You take the sorrel if you want."

Traghorn limped across to the hotel where he had stayed since quitting the hospital, the day after Johnson left. He had discarded the crutch. An hour later he rode the sorrel, striking back toward South Pass, a slim roll behind cantle of the saddle.

III

JEFF TRAGHORN pushed the sorrel across the swell of a ridge. Piñon timber broke away before him into ragged gulch heads and ravines. Off on the other hand, land fell into Ronde Creek. It was the old hostile country below the Butte line shack, tracked over now with the multitudinous hoofs of grazing flocks. Traghorn had spent the night in a top country draw, wrapped in saddle blankets. There was a fire-blackened can that he used for pot, coffee and jerky meat in the thin roll he carried behind cantle. He could feel the stretch and pull of muscle against the pucker of bullet wound in his left thigh, still not entirely healed. Memory came flooding back now, overwhelmingly strong.

Again his ears caught that far-distant sound which had first brought him from timber across the swell. Plain now, somewhere down in that rugged maze of roughs and stony bottoms sloping toward Flood's country, there had been a second rifle shot. Traghorn held his mount. He heard the rifle speak a third and fourth times swiftly. Immediately, faster, a six-gun cut in. Then within the span of twenty seconds of time, the guns were still and there was only the rumbled growl of echoes diminishing against the walls and ridges of the hills. Jeff Traghorn leaned sidewise in the saddle, easing the muscles of his left leg.

"We'll roost here a while, pony," he said to the big-boned sorrel mount. The sun was two hours high over eastward hills.

His gray eyes watched the rough country with a steady, impassive stare. Six or eight miles distant, Oran Flood's road left a canyon and wound off toward Kernan town, a tiny dust-white thread occasionally visible across bottom land. Too far away for that shooting, Traghorn knew. He watched a wisp of dust blow up across a point of nearer ridge, directly below. A horseman showed out there momentarily, climbing furiously.

The man did not come out above. For moments Traghorn watched that end of ridge. He swung the sorrel finally, cut back toward what scattered cover he had left and began working down slope. His eyes were wary, cautious. Mid-way down the slope he paused, studying another

thing. Off half a mile on his left two riders had come in view and were making toward the scene of the shooting through thick bottom brush. Traghorn watched them leave the brush, climb toward him, disappear. He shoved on down into a stunted clump of piñon that would shield his animal.

Somewhere across on his right from here, Traghorn had last seen that single running horseman climb the point of ridge, Through piñon limbs he now made out a horse standing there, droop-headed, only the animal's forequarters visible. Traghorn waited, making no move at all. In the course of moments, the standing horse sidled around. He saw then that the saddle had slipped and was hanging under the animal's belly. He paid no further heed to the horse.

Hooves clicked across ridge rocks, off on his left. Traghorn drew a Winchester from saddle boot. The two coming riders breasted the ridge, moving across above the piñon clump. Both paused suddenly. Traghorn heard Ed Johnson's voice, flat against silence.

"There's a horse over there!" Ed Johnson said. "Saddle slipped." Suddenly his voice was urgent, sharp. "Wait a minute —there's been another animal down ridge here!"

Traghorn said, "That's where I just rode down, Ed."

Johnson had a drawn six-gun in hand when Traghorn shoved from the clump. For a while the wiry, hawk-faced little man stared at him.

"Word come into Mesa Wells yesterday," Traghorn explained. "Never mind. I layed out last night in the high hills. Let's have a look-see at this other horse."

The chunky, dull-faced Indian boy, one of the three riders Johnson had taken back to Block Bar from Mesa Wells less than a week ago, rode at Johnson's side. Clay Barrett had always handled things on the Ronde Creek ranch, Ed Johnson being as close to a foreman as the place had ever known, always Clay's right-hand man. Wind and dust had reddened the hawkish little man's eyes. There was a sleepless, strained, taut look about him.

"Clay's been hurt bad," he said. He was studying that animal beyond, as they shoved toward the standing horse. Traghorn saw something in Ed Johnson stiffen up, and leave every muscle in his wiry frame rigid.

A BULLET had clipped the animal's near flank. Johnson's lips were drawn tight against his teeth. "Get saddle off that horse," he told the Indian boy. "Turn him loose."

The horse had a Block Bar brand on hip. Johnson started following the animal's back-track down across the point of ridge. Traghorn watched thicket edges and openings. This country was full of riders, and others might as easily have heard the shots that had brought Ed Johnson and himself here. He had not pushed the Winchester back in saddle boot. Once Johnson paused.

"You see anything of it?" he snapped.

Traghorn said, "A rider comin' up this end of ridge, still asaddle. It would be a little farther. Four-five rifle shots, a six-gun cuttin' in."

"That's a horse John Barrett rode!" Johnson said. "Barrett still had a month in the sheriff's office to end his term, before Bowman could step in. A month—"

Both saw the man lying down the slope beyond, face down as a slipping saddle had thrown him, arms flung loose. Traghorn realized that the man had had no control over that running horse he had seen come up the ridge. All he could have done was to cling to saddlehorn, holding to the saddle with the last strength in him, till it turned under his weight and left him here. Ed Johnson was off, bending over him. The man was Sheriff John Barrett.

Ed Johnson said with bitter, twitching lips, "A month too long. You don't know what has happened here, Traghorn— How fast it's come! Within the past week of time Flood has brought flocks down into the Ronde Creek meadows. Half the boys we had on Block Bar got their time an' drifted, one by one, sizin' up the situation. The rest pulled out yesterday an' the night before, followin' election, with Clay lyin' there in town, prodded into a street fight, shot down. This ain't a range war, Traghorn."

"I told you what it was, Ed," Traghorn said. "That night in Mesa Wells."

Together they had lifted John Barrett's slumped body around, bracing his head and shoulders up against an old windfall. A

hollow-throated groan escaped the sheriff's lips. He coughed a little. Bent over him, Traghorn said, "Who did this, Barrett? You hear me, if you know—*tell us who did this?*"

Sheriff Barrett's lips moved slightly without sound. He was trying to raise one hand toward the front of his coat. The hand slipped. John Barrett coughed again, drew one rattling breath. Every muscle in him stiffened, then went slack at once, and he was dead.

Traghorn sat back on his heels for a long moment, his face bleak. His gray eyes were opaque, expressionless. He did not speak.

He opened the sheriff's coat, looking down at the star on John Barrett's vest. His fingers shoved into the coat's inner pocket and brought out a small sheaf of papers. Among them was an old attachment warrant, a couple of dog-eared envelopes and a page of an old brand book. Traghorn searched deeper, looking for something else. From the bottom of the pocket he brought up a "Deputy" badge, worn shining and brassy at the star-points from much friction against the sheriff's pocket and occasional use on various possemen's shirts.

Jeff Traghorn got up lamely, looking at the star in his hand. Then he said to Ed Johnson, "I used to wear one of these. The trouble was I quit because it looked like nothing could beat the odds back there. Back in the Cherokee. It cost me everything, put me on the drift. It did worse. All the time in my own mind I never been sure. Maybe if I'd stayed, y' see. . . . How far are you willing to go here, Ed?"

Johnson said, "This ain't your scrap, Traghorn. You ain't on the Block Bar payroll any longer—John Barrett was always against you. You got less call to stay than any other rider. But with me, it's different, see! I was raised over Mesa Wells way. Cattle. I been workin' here eight years. I seen Tonia grow up from a kid, seems like. It's my own country—that's the way I look at it."

Both heard the strike of hooves, the Indian boy coming down from above, where he had hung John Barrett's saddle in the brush.

"That kid's been with me. Ain't yet had a chance to run," Ed Johnson explained. "He'll be gone as soon as he sees clear travelin'."

Traghorn paid no heed to the boy. "Somewhere across slope or down in the roughs yonder, followin' Barrett's backtrail, you're going to find some other track. Two riders is my guess, one of 'em handlin' a rifle. Maybe more. Your job is to follow that track, find where it goes to. Despite anything, Ed. I'll be in Kernan town later."

Ed Johnson was studying him with red, wind-burned eyes that hadn't closed in sleep for more than three hours in the past two nights. Traghorn was pinning the brassy worn deputy star on the pocket-front of his shirt.

Johnson said, "You're sayin' John Barrett lived long enough to deputize you for what's left of his term?"

"I'm not saying anything," Traghorn said. "But the man that figures otherwise has got to shoot this star off!"

IV

THE Oran Flood road swung eastward to a sandy, shale-banked crossing, climbed the swale between two stony ridges, broke down beyond, and entered the rising, mile-wide sweep of a fertile grassland canyon. Flood had bought out a nester outfit in the canyon nine or ten years ago, filing land script to increase his holdings in the immediate vicinity. Every rider that had worked long enough for him had located homestead land, which Flood had purchased. Timber had been skidded down from the higher hills, hewn and notched to build the main house and a sod-roofed bunk shack, corrals and now sheep pens. It was a big, rough-looking outfit.

Traghorn passed three men at the corrals. All stared at him without nod or word while he passed, riding up toward the main house. Half a dozen dogs started clamoring about the yards. A woman's pinched, white face appeared at one of the windows, and was gone a moment later. When Traghorn turned from tying his mount to a rail, Oran Flood's gaunt, angular figure had come out the porch door. Flood stopped on the steps.

He had a high cheek-boned face with deep-sunken, shifty eyes. Like his outfit, Flood was rough, with a long stubble of

sandy beard on cheeks and jaw, a heavy-framed .45 and gunbelt strapped about hips of dirty overalls. A short brush jumper hung from bony shoulders, slightly hunched. He spat a stream of tobacco juice sidewise, staring intently at the deputy star pinned there on Traghorn's shirt front.

"So now John Barrett has been hirin' himself some outside deputies, huh?" he said in a sharp, high-pitched voice. "Usin' tax-payers' money to help him fight a Block Bar war! Mister, for six-eight years back this end of my range ain't never been free of Block Bar cattle. One way to protect yourself is to push hard into the other man's country. There ain't been no court order tellin' me where my sheep got to graze. You picked a poor saddle to ride, Mister Deputy, with a new sheriff already elected."

Traghorn said, "That isn't going to matter so much now, Flood. Another thing is."

"Huh? What d'you mean by that?" Flood's shifty gaze lifted. He looked hard into Traghorn's face for the space of seconds. His eyes changed. Flood said, "You're the man that was mixed up in that Buttle line shack trouble, the day I brung sheep through South Pass. Now you got nerve enough to ride into my home place here behind a deputy star, huh! All right—"

A brown, thick-set man was coming across from the sod-roofed bunkhouse. He stopped, looked at Traghorn with black, beady eyes that showed remembrance of that line shack fight. Flood said, "Call up a couple of boys, Nelse. Somethin' is going to happen here!"

Traghorn stood half a dozen paces from the porch. The herder named Nelse made a sudden wide gesture with one arm toward the men at the corral. He had come out unarmed. He turned, running back into the bunk shack door. Traghorn walked on steadily toward Flood. Spots of anger began to burn in his cheeks. His hands hung loose.

Flood's right arm hitched back, fingers touching the butt of the heavy-framed .45 on his hip. Something in the look of Traghorn's face held him. He took a loose step up on the porch, backward. Steadily Traghorn climbed the steps.

He said, "Get into that house, Flood! Get inside fast!"

Flood backed through the door before him. The three men at the corrals had started running up toward the house. A new clamor of dogs' barking broke loose across the yards. The brown, thick-set herder appeared in the bunkhouse door again, a rifle now in his hands. Traghorn took one pace that put his back flat against the wall of the room.

He stood there, shifting weight to his right leg because that puckered wound in his left thigh hurt, studying Flood deliberately, only that high flare of color in his cheeks showing what was so close underneath. Flood's right hand had left the butt of his gun. The hand quivered slightly. Something in Flood's gaunt, angular frame caved in. His shifty eyes sought the door, a window across the bare space of wall on his right.

THE room held half a dozen worn, straight-backed chairs, a table littered with odds and ends. The pinch-faced woman Traghorn had noticed briefly at another window had hung flimsy curtains here with some pathetic, feminine attempt to give the place a homey look. Traghorn saw these things while he watched Flood with a hard, unyielding stare. Seconds lengthened, passed.

Traghorn said slowly, accenting each word, "You sneaking, low coyote! You cowardly thief of a man! What d'you think is going to happen to you in the end? I wonder how you figure it, Flood!"

Anger whipped across Flood's features, briefly stiffening him. "One thing, you won't get out of here the same way you come," he said. "That deputy star you're wearin' don't mean you will. Barrett may be holdin' down his office seat for another month. But he's already done. He was out the day before yesterday when Bowman was elected to his job. He's through!"

"More than that!" Traghorn said. "John Barrett is lying over in the roughs above the shale-bank crossing on your road. He's dead!"

"Huh!" Flood's face went blank. His shifty eyes for a moment looked into Traghorn's. "When? Who did it?" His expression tightened. "All right," Flood

said noncommittally. "I reckon that's all right by me, too."

The scorn he felt for this man was heavy in Traghorn's voice. "What d'you think is coming now? How long do you think you've got, Flood?" he asked. "That day has been shoved up just a month nearer. John Barrett was the last man standin' between you and what is coming, whether a couple of your own riders did this shootin' job or not.

"No, I don't think you did it. A month when Barrett would have been out of office anyhow would have been soon enough for you. You figure you've got the best part of Ronde Creek as things stand. Ronde Creek was the dividing line Mantone offered you, wasn't it? The dividing line between him and you, after Block Bar had been shoved out?

"Don't think this is the first time a deal like that has been hatched," Traghorn went on. "It's as old as men's scheming after grass—or after a county of grassland. That's what Mantone is after. Everything! As long as you and Block Bar ran country east of South Pass, he couldn't have shoved across without buckin' the two of you. You'd have stood with the Barretts then. So Mantone worked the other way. You were the coyote sort of man that he could deal with! All right, what now? You've pushed your sheep into Ronde Creek. Clay was shot in town election day. John Barrett is lying up there in the roughs dead. You're one outfit east of Ronde Creek, whittled down by war and your own greed. Mantone's played a hands-off game so far. But now how long do you think it will be before he moves up on you, takes you in his stride? Takes everything, Flood!"

Boots were moving up along the outside porch, step by step. A loose plank creaked. Traghorn's eyes did not leave Flood. "Tell that man to get out of here," he said.

Flood stood like a man transfixed, backed against the littered table in the room. "Forget it, Nelse!" he ordered slowly. "Go back to the bunkhouse. Leave us alone."

He shook his head, his shifty eyes staring at Traghorn again. "No, Mantone wouldn't do it," Flood muttered tonelessly. "He knows the deal we made—Ronde Creek was the boundary; he comes east that far. He's put up money. He's backed me there in town."

Traghorn said, "Mantone has backed himself in town. What money he spent was money to elect Dunn Bowman into the sheriff's office. He's got control of the law and town now. The rest will follow naturally. Mantone will crowd the basin with the wanted breed from the trails, offerin' such immunity, till he can put his own men into other county offices, recorder's and tax-collector's jobs. What little owners, the nesters and homesteaders that have been bothering the fringe of his own range, will either be taxed to death or rustled out. Nine-tenths or more of this land is still free open range; that's why you could crowd sheep down into Ronde Creek and not face court order of eviction. With the county reins in his control, Mantone will hold the Kernan Basin in his hand. It ain't the first time a man, or some one outfit, has had such an ambition.

"You figure he's cuttin' you in for a share of that, Flood?" Traghorn asked. "You figure Thorpe Mantone's plans include you and your sheep? Do I have to tell you all of this to make you see it? You damn' fool!"

He swung toward the door. "Now I'm leaving here the same way I came. You're not the man that's going to stop me; you're going to need whatever fighting strength you've got elsewhere. But walk ahead out of this door and give your men that order. Move, Flood!"

FLOOD went back into that bare, scantily furnished room. He sat down on one of the straight-backed chairs, elbows on his knees, head cupped on the rough, calloused palms of his hands. His deep-sunk, shifty eyes stared at a fixed spot on the floor before him, steady now, seeing nothing. Once the narrow-faced woman came into a door behind. She looked at Flood for a moment, her eyes showing nothing, neither pity nor contempt, and went away. The moments lengthened.

How long a time had passed when he heard hooves come into the yards, traveling at a canter, and stop at the hitch-rail, Flood did not know. A heavy voice said, "You wait with the horses, Spike."

Two men climbed the steps. Flood's

head came up, although he did not rise from the chair. Creases showed under the stubble of sandy beard on his face, lined bitterly about his mouth. His shifty eyes were on the door when Mantone came in.

Thorpe Mantone stood there a moment, his heavy-set frame blocked against the light, studying Flood with pale, narrow-lidded eyes. He walked half across the room without speaking, caught one of the straight chairs with the kick of his boot and knocked it around against the wall. Mantone dropped into it, tilted back. He was still looking at Flood.

Bowman had followed him through the door. Bowman stopped, leaning there idly against the casement, no curiosity on his face. He paid no heed to Flood, taking out tobacco sack, spilling flakes into paper, rolling the smoke deftly between blunt, thick fingers. He licked the cigarette with a single motion that left it hanging between his lips.

Flood's shifty eyes looked from one man to the other now. Since nobody spoke, he said weakly, finally, "What's this?"

Mantone's face showed no expression. "That's what I'm wonderin'," he said. "Down road a space we run into a rider that Bowman knows. Man named Traghorn. He'd been up here."

Flood sought to escape their eyes. He stared at the floor once more. "Suppose he was?"

"Not suppose!" Mantone snapped. "His track left your yards here. The looks of it, Traghorn was wearin' a deputy star. What did Traghorn want up here?"

"He had some things to say."

"What kind of things?"

"John Barrett's been killed," Flood said. "It happened somewhere over in the roughs above shale rock crossin'. I don't know where. This mornin' some time."

"I want to know how Traghorn got that deputy star," Mantone said. "How long has he been back in this country?"

Flood shook his head. "Don't know. He didn't say."

Weighted heavy silence came back into this room. The sound of a match struck in Bowman's hands, to light his smoke, sounded loud. Finally Mantone turned to Bowman.

"Dunn," he said, "I reckon you're needed back in town right away. Cut the dust! Don't let Traghorn make any kind of a play that you can stop."

Still without interest, without curiosity, Bowman went outside and got in his saddle. He said to the man waiting there, "Boss's orders," and struck out past the corrals for the Oran Flood road.

Thorpe Mantone waited till the sound of hooves had died. His heavy-set frame, tilted in the chair, was slack. Then he said, "Flood, some things have changed. This mornin' my boys had orders to move cattle up to Ronde Creek. You've been hoggin' a lot of bottom graze there since you brought sheep down. Them boys of mine will have trouble gettin' cattle to bed down where sheep has been. They won't stay. We'll have cattle stringin' back to Spur Hook, despite anything. Cattle won't graze ground sheep has crossed. You know that, don't you, Flood?"

Fear smoldering in the depths of Flood's deep-sunken eyes leaped to the surface. He halfway stood up from the chair he sat in, then dropped back into it, looking at Mantone.

"The basin's never been sheep country," Mantone continued without change of voice. "The two don't mix—sheep and cows. I don't know what you're goin' to do. What cattle my boys move up to Ronde Creek stay there. If some riders have to stampede sheep, that's too bad. I thought I'd ride by this way and tell you. Another thing, there's been some pretty hostile talk around town about the way Clay Barrett was pushed into a fight and shot on the street election day. It's been said you might have hired the gun-slinger that did that job. If John Barrett's body is found over on this end of your country, I reckon matters won't be helped."

Flood's voice became almost a scream. "So you're givin' me the double-cross like this? That's what you mean! You know whose man forced that fight on Clay. You rode in here with him just now. He's waitin' out there with your horses. I heard you speak to him—Spike Kane!"

Mantone shrugged. "Spike's been on the dodge since election day," Mantone said. "Bowman ain't in office yet. So the best we could do was to have Spike write out a paper before he skips, sayin' you paid him for that business. That's

the way things stack up, Flood. Better move them sheep."

"Mantone, you buy me out!" Flood's voice was a choked, pleading whisper. "You can't do less. You know how hard I worked here—years of it, gettin' ahead any way I could. Cattle never did so well across my rough ground. That's why I wanted a share of the Ronde Creek range. You know the deal we made! You can't go back on it. You can't double-cross me cold now. Mantone, you buy me out!"

Thorpe Mantone stood up. "Flood, I'm not buying anything more. I've bought all I need."

He kicked the chair back against the wall and went out abruptly, without looking back. Flood did not move. He heard hooves leave the yards, striking west toward the hill trail that crossed to Ronde Creek now. The clamor of dogs without stilled. Flood stared at the floor. He had lived a shifty, bitter life, never wholly honorable at one time, never outlaw bad. There wasn't the strength of fiber in him to be either.

The pinch-faced woman moved noiselessly into the other door, where she stood for a moment. Noiseless, she had heard every word, as she heard everything that transpired within the hewn-log walls of this bleak house. She crossed toward Flood softly. "Oran! Oran!" she cried, "what's it mean? What's going to happen now?"

Flood's loose hands worked. When he looked up at her, she saw suddenly that his shifty eyes were wet, and a sort of compassion that she hadn't known since the days when she had first married Oran Flood came to her again. Flood stood up slowly to his gaunt, angular height. He was shaking all over now. He said, "I've never been much good to you, Elsie. Nor to myself. I'm going to see if I can change it!"

V

FROM some source word had already reached Kernan town. A group of men, standing at the side-street alley corner, turned as Traghorn rode in. One nudged another. A man stepped carefully back till he leaned against the building wall. Talk was suspended in this instant. Two were Thorpe Mantone hands. There was no movement as Traghorn passed and swung into the alley that led to the corral lot behind the sheriff's office. Then one of the two Thorpe Mantone men turned and ran awkwardly across the street to a hitch-rack, where he climbed saddle.

A sweat-marked, dusty Block Bar horse stood in the sheriff's corral, along with two of Sheriff Barrett's spare animals. The fat-faced Indian boy that had been with Ed Johnson was pulling saddle from the spent animal, swinging it on a fresh mount. Traghorn had dismounted before the boy noticed him.

"Where did you leave Ed Johnson?"

The boy fidgeted. "He tells me, ride into town here. Get help at the livery stable an' a wagon," the boy mumbled. "Then show 'em where to find John Barrett."

"You won't need a fresh horse for that," Traghorn told him. "Hoof it back to the livery stable and ride along in that wagon. Afterwards you can get out and quit."

A horse, pushed into a run, drummed past along the street beyond, heading for the Mantone road. Methodically, Traghorn unsaddled his own animal and tossed hay into the corral. He pulled the Winchester from boot and carried it toward the sheriff's office with him. He wondered how much time he had.

He had been in Sheriff John Barrett's office in the past, this small, street-front room, cluttered with the gear of frontier law enforcement, a rack of guns with which to outfit possemen, three or four spare saddles stacked in a corner. There was a scarred, big desk, a few legal books. The rear wall was plastered over with old "wanted-and-reward" notices, except for the space on an inner door. Barrett had used the other room for living quarters, while he stayed on the job here in town.

Traghorn shoved the door open. Someone else had been using the back room of late. He saw a woman's dress folded neatly and laid across the back of a chair. He closed the door. He was standing back, scrutinizing walls and window openings with a dark, certain knowledge of what would be happening here before much time elapsed, when the street door opened.

Tonia Barrett saw him as she came inside. He knew that word of John Bar-

rett's death must have just reached her from what he saw on her face. She stopped. Her voice came across to him, small and suddenly tight in her throat, "It —then it's true?"

"Yes, it's true," Traghorn said.

He had had no experience with women, times like this. He could only stand there and tell her bluntly that her elder brother, John Barrett, was dead, as he would have told a man. He wanted to walk across to her, to hold her in his arms, and give her some of that hard, steady strength that was burning in him now. But he could not. A gulf as wide as the distance back to the Cherokee country he remembered and this street, where the hot, deadly flame of another pitched gun-battle was building now, lay between them. She belonged to a different world than what Jeff Traghorn's had been. What was past was done, he had no choice about it.

His knowledge was of men, and the things men fought for, and the depths of loneliness that were a part of this. This girl with her dark, warm eyes, her straight, slender womanhood, was unattainable as the stars. He had never thought different.

She said, holding her voice steady, "I've been staying here in town to be near Clay. I was with him when I heard. . . ."

She walked past him to the door into the other room, her shoulders still straight, and it was not till the door closed behind that he heard the muffled sound of her sobbing. Jeff Traghorn had another memory of Tonia Barrett then, to file away with others cherished in the depths of his memory. It was something brave in her, different than the kind of bravery he knew in men, yet no less strong. He knew it when he saw it.

A KNOT of men had congregated in front of Kernan Hall, across street. Traghorn walked into the street-front door of the sheriff's office and stood there openly, the brassy-worn star on his shirt front. A lank, old homesteader from over on the edge of Mantone's country was loading a scant box of supplies into the back of a spring wagon next door. He stopped, bent over the box, and stared at Traghorn.

The men in front of Kernan Hall turned slowly, one by one. It was a move fully understood by each watcher. A rider idling on the walk by the Alamo Bar slid around and went into the saloon. New dust was fanning up along the Mantone road.

A single horseman circled in from the other way, riding hard, and left his mount at the O. K. Corrals. Traghorn remained motionless in the open doorway, while Dunn Bowman came up street from the corrals. The riders on the Mantone road swerved into town and caught up with Bowman in the middle of the block. Bowman stood there for half a moment in parley, shaking his head. Then he came on alone. The street was utterly silent now.

Abreast the Alamo Bar, Bowman's left hand lifted, pulled tobacco sack from shirt pocket. His right hand came up to join the left, flipping a paper loose. This also was a move fully understood. Not till then did Bowman's eyes seek Traghorn's with a sharp, searching stare. His voice was toneless, flat.

"I'll have a word with you, Trag. Before this goes any farther!"

Traghorn said, "Suit yourself!" and stood aside.

Bowman eased his weight around and sat back on an edge of the scarred office desk. His eyes took in the rack of stacked weapons, the windows in the front of the place, the place, the door. His voice was heavier. "So you didn't have enough of it back there in the Cherokee, eh?" he asked. "It wasn't enough to get two slugs inside your ribs, fightin' where you never had a chance from the beginnin'? You lost everything back there. Your sheriff was a hunted outlaw before the game was half played out, a vigilance committee huntin' him and his deputies."

"Not a vigilance committee. It was a gun crew backed with the stack of the winner's money, callin' itself that. Things looked too tough," Traghorn said softly. "When I got up again myself I never went back. I've thought a lot about that. I didn't play it to the finish."

"There's money here," Bowman snapped. "Don't think there ain't. The stack's as big!"

"I was over in Mesa Wells the night five men stuck up the bank there. Small pickin's from a town like Mesa Wells, but it all helps," Traghorn said. "I reckon you

had the job well covered. The Mesa Wells posse brought in nothin' that I know of."

Bowman shrugged. "Some of the boys got restless, waitin'. It was an easy take—except we lost a man." He went on slowly, "Figure what the sheriff's office will pay behind the boundaries of the kind of a county Mantone an' me figure to set up here. Money to buy immunity comin' in from the outside. Mantone wants the land, he wants the grass. But it all works together.

"There'll be the rustlin' end," he went on softly. "Till Mantone gets the nesters and homestead owners moved out, there'll be owl-hooters runnin' a steady stream of drift to the outside. Wet-blanket brands comin' back, nursed in the hills. No come-back from the inside here. What can they do? It would take a U. S. Marshal to break it, and the government is mighty slow to mix in county wars or politics. The sheriff's office here ought to pay a hundred thousand dollars in the next three-year term—I mean the sheriff ought to make that much from it, leavin' the rest to Mantone. There's the other side, records and deeds, taxes in the town here—"

Traghorn said, "I know all that."

"If it's a deputy you're holdin' out for," Bowman suggested. "I'm givin' you your chance. I can use a man like you. First deputy under me. When you get into a stud game then, it won't need to be penny-ante."

Traghorn touched the star on his shirt with the end of a thumb. "What's this look like to you, Bowman?"

BOWMAN hunched his shoulders. He stood away from the desk, moving back into the street-front door. He turned. "Play it that way, if you want to, Trag. I don't know why you want to force a bluff. My hunch is Barrett didn't live long enough to deputize you."

The gray of Traghorn's eyes slashed at him. "You have a hand in that?"

"Not personally. I do my gun-play from the front. You'll remember that from the Cherokee."

"You never were a liar, Dunn."

Bowman went out into the street. The group in front of Kernan Hall had spread two ways and disappeared. The riders from the Mantone road had taken their horses back to the O. K. Corral, where eight men were now waiting at the end of the street. Bowman moved toward them without hurry. No sound came from the Alamo Bar. In this interval the lank, old homesteader had whipped his team into a side-street.

Now there was only the waiting. Brassy afternoon sunlight filled the street. Jeff Traghorn had turned. The door to the other room was open now. Tonia Barrett was standing there. He remembered how he had always liked to see her last of all, making one of his rare trips to Ronde Creek from the Butte line shack or some other, because then the memory of her was stronger. It was something almost definite to take away with him. This was a man's land and women were few. A new school teacher at some crossroad's junction would bring in riders for fifty miles around, just for a stray glimpse of her. This girl's dark, warm eyes, the friendly bit of a smile, Traghorn could never forget.

Gently, he said, "You'd better go now. Go back to Clay. If he's got a room in the doctor's house, they'll take you in. Take your things."

Her dark eyes watched him. She did not move. "Why did you come back here?" she asked. "You owed Clay nothing more. I remember the day he hired you. There'd already been a little trouble then. Clay was paying no more than cowhand wages, but he always kept you at one line shack or another, where trouble was likely to break. You owe John Barrett even less."

Traghorn said, "Sheriff Barrett was a man. What faults he had were on the good side. I'm proud to back his hand."

"Why?" she asked.

Traghorn looked away. "For myself, I guess." She had come a step or two toward him. Suddenly that gray wall of restraint in his eyes broke down. "It isn't grass, or sheep or cows that starts a war like this. It's men—and the things men want behind it all. I'll never get another job as a plain cowhand. The mark of that old Cherokee business is scarred too deep in me. I'll never be able to build an outfit of my own, unless I swing to the long rope side. I want to face it here. I've lived through two years full of regrets." He shook his head. "I can't explain it better."

For a while she looked at him, the warmth in her eyes brighter. "Yes, I think I understand—," she had said, when the noise of a gun cut in.

He moved suddenly, pushing her with one hand. "Get back!"

The group of eight riders still stood at the far end of the street. Nearer, Bowman had paused, turned aside. Two shots followed from the vicinity of the side street alley, the other way, spaced so close echoes smashed against building fronts as one. A hard-running horse came down through the alley, the way Traghorn had ridden into town. He heard the body of that horse slam into corral rails in the rear of the sheriff's lot.

Another animal was racing up along the side street, rounding corner toward the front of the sheriff's office. It stopped. A rider came off there, spraddle-legged, running.

Traghorn had stepped one pace into the street, giving himself enough room to swing a gun. He was carrying the Winchester in his left hand. He heard boots coming up along the space between the sheriff's office and the square-fronted store building on that hand, from the corral and he knew then that the horse running through the alley had been Ed Johnson's.

Down street, the other way, Dunn Bowman had cupped hands to mouth. "Keep out of this, Spike!" his powerful bellow was audible up the block. "Wait for Mantone now!"

ED JOHNSON rounded the front corner of the building as the man in the street, paying no heed, cut loose. Traghorn still held the Winchester in one hand. Slapping it to his hip he fired. He jacked the lever, threw in another shell. He heard no shots now. The only thing his sense recorded was that hook-legged, white-faced man coming across the end of the street, firing. Guns blasted at the space of fifty yards. The impact of detonation slammed both ways against building fronts.

Spike Kane faltered as though some invisible fist had hit him in the chest, holding him for an instant. Two days ago, this same bow-legged, white-faced killer had cursed Clay Barrett into a gun-fight on this length of street, and ridden out of town. Some animal vitality kept him on his feet. Mortally hit by Traghorn's second shot, Kane still remained standing, even coming forward, while his gun spilled out its lead.

The group of riders at the far end of the street had split. From there, a rifle shot raked along the face of the sheriff's office, ricocheted and went screaming off into space.

Dropped in the dust, Spike Kane's fumbling fingers fought to reload his gun. Kane had never had a close friend. The hardest of the outlaw clan he rode with had always sought to avoid him. The man was venomous as a rattlesnake. One pane of the front window of the sheriff's office had been knocked out. Two of Kane's shots had embedded lead in the door frame, to the sides of Traghorn's body. Three or four rifles at the far end of the street now got the long, quartering range at once, and the sudden volume of sound was a broken roar across the town. As suddenly, it was still.

Across street, some hidden townsman's voice became plain: "What brought Kane into it like that?"

Traghorn stood inside the office door, the door closed except for the space of the Winchester's muzzle. He did not fire the Winchester again. The return of silence along the street was as complete as the other had been violent. At any second it would start anew. But now even that voice across street was still. The only sound within the sheriff's office room was the suppressed, quick panting of Ed Johnson's breathing. The wiry little man had a smear of blood across one cheek.

He said, "Kane had been hiding out in the roughs—over there in Flood's country. Somebody must have brought John Barrett word late last night—or early this mornin'. Barrett had swung into the roughs from the Flood road. There was one rifleman waitin' him on higher ground. This man must have opened first, must have placed the shot that killed Barrett. Because Kane come into it too far away for any accurate six-gun range. The whole thing was a plant.

"From there, these two struck into rocks, travelin' toward Flood's. I send that boy with me out here to town, tellin' him what to do. He wasn't no good trackin'. Too scared. I picked up trail again where Kane an' this other left the rocks an' come out

on Flood's road beyond, meetin' a third rider there. Track milled around as though they'd had a conflab. The three went on toward Flood's together."

Traghorn said, "The third rider was Bowman."

"Yeah, I know. I'd swung back into the hills, workin' around to the south, to get a look down into Flood's canyon. I seen Bowman leave, headed back for town. Ten-fifteen minutes later, Kane an' Mantone come out and struck up across the Ronde Crick trail. Maybe that's where I make a mistake," Ed Johnson muttered. "I figured I wanted another look at the track them two hosses was makin'. Wanted to be sure of what I knew. Kane seen me in the brush behind. There was some shootin'."

Johnson had a rag bound around one arm. He kept it hidden behind him. "We was in the rocks. A stray nicked this arm of mine. It stiffened, useless on me. So I took it on the run, Kane followin'. Somehow he got ahead. He was waitin' on the edge of town here for me when I rode in. Mantone had parted from Kane and gone on toward Ronde Crick. Another thing—I seen Flood leave his canyon with five riders."

VI

WHAT Mantone men were now in town had worked up behind buildings and spaced themselves in sheltered groups across street in the spaces next a hardware house and Kernan Hall. Occasionally a man's hat brim showed, or a gun muzzle was visible. Some rider pumped out the round in a rifle magazine, splintering lead into the face of the sheriff's office with a burst of enthusiasm. Within half an hour more arrived, swelling the total to fourteen Mantone hands in town. Four or five men had been placed in the rear alley way, commanding direct shooting range on the lot and corral behind the sheriff's office. The force across street had not changed much. There was no more stray shooting.

Traghorn looked at Tonia Barrett. He had made her get down behind the bulk of John Barrett's old desk, where she leaned her head back against its scarred frame. The way she sat there showed the full, delicate line of her throat. Traghorn's breathing tightened.

"Under a white flag, you'd still be safe to walk out now," he said. "Nobody knows you're in here. The hardest cases in Mantone's outfit aren't asking to fire on a woman."

They had made a sling for Ed Johnson's arm. The sling was loose enough so he could get a rifle butt up against his shoulder and hook a finger on trigger, holding the gun steady with his other arm. Ed Johnson had seen this girl grow from a long-legged youngster into womanhood. He muttered now, "You been a stubborn kid since I first remember, Tonia. Clay never tried much to handle you. But John Barrett, tryin', got no farther, seemed like."

She shook her head. "No, there'll be one Barrett in the finish, too."

Sooner or later Mantone was coming into this length of street. There were certain rules to a play like this—things that could not be disregarded. Two desperate men estanched in a building as solid as this street-front sheriff's office room, with plentiful ammunition, a number of ready-loaded rifles from the possemen's rack at hand, might beat beat back massed attack for a time. They might last out here for hours, even days. The place could not be burned without firing the store building on one side and the Alamo Saloon on the other. Such a conflagration would take the block of wooden structures on this side of the street.

Attack would inevitably cost men. Those men waiting in shelter behind the sides of Kernan Hall and the hardware store across street were fully aware of this. The waiting now was for Mantone. Sooner or later, Traghorn was going to be given the chance to come out fighting. He knew this as certainly as he knew he was going to take that chance when it was offered.

Mantone could not afford to sacrifice riders needlessly. Any weakness that he showed before his men or this town would immediately tempt some stronger man to step into Mantone's boots and control. Some man like Dunn Bowman. Thorpe Mantone had chosen to live by the gun, to assemble this gun crew about him. And now he had to rule by the strength of his gun. This also was one of the costs of such warfare.

Shadows from westward walls had reached the middle of the street. Fresh dust blew up across the town. New riders from the Ronde Creek road had swept in from the south, swinging through back alleys to reach the O. K. Corrals, where Bowman had been waiting. More time passed. There was some commotion among the men shielded across street. The hardware store was being opened up from the rear, Traghorn saw, for inside cover directly opposite. Men were already inside Kernan Hall. Then other hooves beat in from the south.

A rider came along the side-street as far as the corner, and yelled down toward Kernan Hall, "Here come some more! Flood's brought in his crew!"

Without hesitation, Dunn Bowman stepped from the wide door of Kernan Hall and stood at the head of its flight of steps. The bead of Traghorn's Winchester would have covered his chest—but this also was a part of the game. Bowman knew that Traghorn would not fire so long as he stood there, hands empty. Bowman came halfway down the steps.

Mantone disclosed his own presence on the street now from the doorway of the Alamo Bar. He bawled across toward Kernan Hall and the hardware house, "Some of you boys stop Flood! That's all you need to know. He ain't wanted here; we'll handle this ourselves!"

A HEAVIER drum of hooves beat back his words. Oran Flood had left his canyon with five men from the yards, and a purpose hard to have named at that time. Moving across the lower stretch of his road, Flood had turned up Ronde Creek as far as the first two of his flocks, collecting three additional riders and two shepherds there. Ronde Creek was filled with Mantone cattle, drifted through last night and this morning. But Mantone, coming across the upper trail, had taken the crew pushed in with his stock and gone out ahead toward town. That first weakling purpose, given birth from desperation, had steadied in Flood as he rode into town, ten men at his heels.

Horses stopped before they reached the side-street corner Spike Kane had rounded before quitting mount, an hour ago. From the steps of Kernan Hall, Dunn Bowman had a better view. He looked across toward the Alamo Bar and Mantone. Bowman shrugged thick shoulders.

"One way or another, maybe your stack of chips got pushed across the table, Mantone. It wouldn't be the first time. I'm wonderin' myself;" he said. "It's too late now to stop it!"

He was standing on the street, angled across from the sheriff's office, wearing two guns where formerly one had swung at hip. There was no hesitation in Bowman. No reaching for tobacco sack and papers now, although he was as cool. Lack of courage was not one of his failings. Bowman began to cross toward the sheriff's office, step by step. And it occurred to Jeff Traghorn, that instant, that the old plot within a plot had already begun to stir again. If Bowman left this street alive, he would clean out Mantone long before any three-year term in the sheriff's office was ended. That was Bowman's play.

Bowman said, "Comin' out this way, Trag? Or do you want me to come in after you and drag you out?"

Ed Johnson said, "It's a trick! They'll get you between cross-fire, mow you down. . . ."

Then in the room behind, Ed Johnson's lips closed tight. He was grappling with Tonia, using his one good arm to hold her back. Ed Johnson whispered, "Steady, girl! He knew this was comin'. I reckon it's what he was waitin' for!"

Traghorn had reached the walk curb, deliberately, without hurry. The Winchester leaned against the inside wall of the sheriff's door. Traghorn's right hand was lifted a little, suspended motionless over holster, as he walked, angling across that flat, dusty width of street toward Bowman. Thirty yards—lessening. Both men were taut, leaning forward on their feet each step. A whisper now along this street would have sounded loud. Men behind the hardware house, in Kernan Hall, at the side-street corner where Flood stood, watched.

Bowman stopped. Muscles stiffened, stood out suddenly, corded, along sides of his neck. The two hands over his guns were big-boned claws, turned white at the knuckles with strain. But the gun that exploded then was in the hands of neither.

The roar of it cut loose from the door of the Alamo Bar!

Ed Johnson muttered a stifled groan, grabbing for the stock of the Winchester, to get it against his shoulder. "So that was the trick—"

BUT only Ed Johnson heard his own words. Traghorn's hip-gun had exploded once in that interval. Bowman's two weapons were out, the right roaring twice. In that instant of time while Ed Johnson reached and tried to get the butt of the Winchester against his shoulder, all hell broke loose along the street.

Firing from the Alamo, Thorpe Mantone had taken two paces out from the saloon's swinging doors. A gun had started inside the hardware house, muzzle thrust through window glass that fell and splintered after the shot. A heavy old-time Sharp's was smashing from the side-street corner. Two steady rifles opened with the Sharp's from that corner where Flood had stopped. Flood had no other choice; he was coming in.

A dozen guns roared simultaneously. Things happened here with a swiftness the senses could not record. Thorpe Mantone stood in front of the Alamo Bar, balanced, trying to turn and take those two paces back. Something sagged in Bowman. Every muscle in his big, chesty frame strained to pull trigger. A shocked, unbelieving look spread across his features. Just now, Traghorn swung his gun toward the Alamo Bar. What he saw there kept him from firing.

Three men crowded the wide door of Kernan Hall which Bowman had left. The Winchester Ed Johnson worked to his shoulder added its sound to that other blast. Traghorn stood in the thick of it. He was moving on toward Bowman now, but firing at the men in the door of Kernan Hall, as Johnson was. Bowman had gone down to his knees. He sprawled forward in the dust suddenly. Traghorn paused to pick up Bowman's two weapons. His own was done. A man lay head forward down the steps of Kernan Hall.

A quartering hail of lead from the side-street corner had struck the front of the hardware house. A part of the force within the hardware store, starting to obey Mantone's order, had quit the building at the rear, turning south to reach the side street. A new battle broke out there with Flood's force, continued. Two riders on guard at the rear of the sheriff's office had pushed through between buildings. One pumped four shells into the street before he turned. The other fell. Mantone was on his hands and knees, weaponless, still trying to drag back into the shelter of the Alamo's doorway, inch by inch.

Flood men crossed the end of the street. Among them was the lank old homesteader Traghorn had seen earlier loading a scant box of supplies into the back of his spring wagon. Traghorn had run in against the front of Kernan Hall, stopped, reloading. Behind the sheriff's office, a rider hit saddle and raced north along the alley. Oran Flood's gaunt, angular figure was working down the face of buildings toward Mantone, the heavy Sharp's gun in his hands.

Across the town in a break of silence, some voice yelled, "Both Mantone and Bowman! Both down, I tell you!"

Thorpe Mantone lay lifeless across the walk planks in front of the Alamo Bar now, never having reached the door, a heavy Sharp's slug through him.

VII

SHADOWS reached across the street from west walls, climbing the face of buildings on the east. Jeff Traghorn stood in that little street-front sheriff's office, dusk settling within the room.

"I reckon I misjudged you, Flood," he said. "In one way—not another. You've got country of your own that will handle what sheep you've brought in here. Sheep might do well in there, as good as you ever expected. Get back on that range!"

For an instant Flood's eyes lifted, the old shifty light kindled in their depths. "There's Mantone's country now," he muttered. "Without Mantone things will break up there. I was figurin' to beat the nesters an' homesteaders into it. Between Block Bar an' me now, if we stood together, we could. . . ."

"You haven't had enough?"

Flood stood in the doorway, shoulders hunched. "You put it that way an' I reckon I have." He turned away slowly. "S'long."

Riders moved out along the street, strik-

ing into a jog. Jeff Traghorn waited in the dusk, motionless. Clay Barrett was out of danger, in the next few weeks or a month he would be up again, handling Ronde Creek. Ed Johnson was down the street now, gathering up neutral men from which to form a riding crew. The battle fought out here had been more than a fight between sheep and cow interests, as such things always were. Mantone had wanted the sweep of basin land, control of the law and county for himself and his hangers-on, as Traghorn had seen it happen once before in the Cherokee. In another way, he was thinking, that old fight that had cost him so much had been fought again here.

Cowmen against sheepherders. Thus had it been back there and so must it have been here, inevitably. The old story; the old hates, and the same old ending. He would move on. His gun was still for hire, and somewhere far from Ronde Creek it would speak again. Perhaps then for the last time. That too was the only end to the road he traveled. But before it had always been different. There had been no Tonia Barrett then. No tie which he was loath to break. But he knew that he must break it. Ride out and forget. He shrugged and looked curiously at his torn and ragged shirt.

How he had lived through that roar of lead and conflict along the street and come out unwounded, Traghorn did not know. The law of averages had evened things up maybe, he thought. His clothing showed the rip of three bullets, one torn across the chest of his shirt. He felt it there, unpinning the brassy-worn deputy star from his pocket front. He dropped the star on the flat of the scarred old desk behind him. It made a small metallic click of sound.

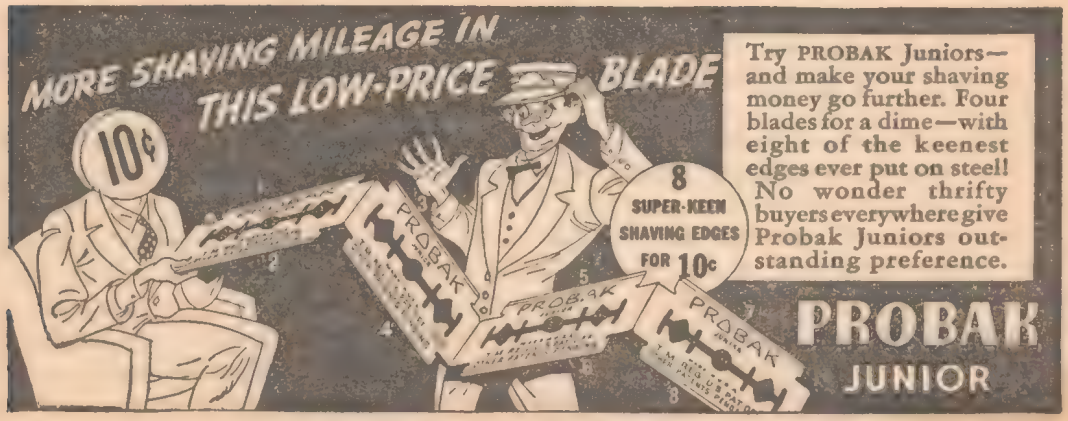
Tonia Barrett came in from the other room, carrying a lighted lamp, the way he had wanted to see her before he left, another memory of her added to those he had. It had always been like this since he had first seen her. He could see the dark pools her eyes made, mirroring tiny bits of the lamp's flame, the small curve of one cheek, the line of her throat. She noticed the deputy star, and turned to him.

"You mean you're going away like this?" she asked.

He didn't speak. Part of that old story from the Cherokee she knew. Traghorn had mentioned it. Bowman's words within this room had told her more. While he stood there she came toward him. Her two hands lifted, took hold of his shoulders, feeling the hard man's strength in him, his big, muscular frame.

Softly she said, "It's not like that this time, Jeff! You're not going away now. You're coming back to Ronde Creek. With me, Jeff. You're never going to leave. Jeff, where are your arms? Don't you want me?"

The man's strength of his arms gathered slowly, took her, crushed her to him. Jeff Traghorn could not speak.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BULLETS FOR BREAKFAST

By SAM CARSON

Oil yore saddle guns, yuh highline hombres! Fer tonight Red Jack O' Diamonds is ridin' the owl trail—an' his iron is packin' the pay-off slug for a bushwacked pard!

THE red-headed puncher hesitated a long moment before starting to dismount at the gnawed and sun-baked hitch rail. Hastily his slate-blue eyes swept a quick glance across the patch of dusty street to the front of the Golden Rule saloon and to the men grouped there. His lips drew down at the corners in a wry grin at the sight of them. He nodded slightly, in silent confirmation.

"A bunch o' killers," he breathed. "Nary a one who wouldn't knife his grandmaw in the back, any old night-time. Yessir!"

There they stood, as if waiting for him, as if expecting him. That bunch certainly had not been underestimated when he had started to Larkspur. And yet the form of the one man he was hoping to see was not visible. Well, there'd be time, plenty of time for that—later.

His manner was bland, but his nerves

were tense as he dismounted beside his Cannonball horse at the hitch rail. The hitch rail belonged to the establishment of A. Levy, General Merchandise and Post Office. Directly across Larkspur's gray Main Street on the porch of the Golden Rule the dozen men were gathered in somber, baleful silence. They watched him, hard-eyed and hostile. They were big men, fighting men, and each wore two guns. He had been warned about them on his way to town. They were looking for a man, the man known as "Jack o' Diamonds." And the rider, as he carefully inspected his mount and saddle gear, sang beneath his breath:

You Jack o' Diamonds,
Oh, you Jack o' Diamonds
Who you ridin' for to meet tonight?
Red Jack o' Diamonds!

The door of the general store opened and a young woman came out, bearing several small bundles. She went straight to a large bay horse at the rail. She ignored the gang across the street, and there was a hint of defiance in the tilt of her small, determined chin.

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly looked at her. He sensed the situation instantly. There was enmity between her and the gang, a strange and sinister sort of enmity. The girl backed the bay from the rail. As she prepared to mount, the bay backed and snorted. She spoke firmly, then tried again. Once more he evaded her. She reprimanded him sharply and jerked his bit. But he had the advantage and knew it. He went into a snorting dance of rage and dragged her out into the roadway.

None of the men on the saloon porch stirred. The cowboy sent a narrow-eyed glance their way, and then sprang into the road. The girl tried to refuse his aid, but she had to accept. Jack o' Diamonds took a grip on the reins close to the bit and yanked savagely.

"Wipe that wickedness out of your eye, crowbait!" he snarled. "Act a gentleman for the lady or I'll skin you alive!"

They struggled for a moment in the road but the man was master. The bay's indignation subsided suddenly and he stood still, quivering and chastened.

"All right, now, I reckon, ma'am," Jack o' Diamonds told the girl. "I'll give you a lift in the saddle."

She looked at him, frowning, slightly puzzled. Then she came to the side of the horse and rose into the saddle unaided.

"Thank you kindly," she said evenly, settling her bundles. "He doesn't like skirts. I'm afraid he hasn't a proper respect for women."

"He must be a native of these parts, ma'am," the cowboy observed dryly. "He has a lot in common with the other residents hereabouts."

HER eyes lighted with appreciation and they smiled. He was blue-eyed, lightly freckled, copper-red of hair, and there was a trace of audacity in his broad, smiling mouth. He wore batwing chaps, a gun-belt, a worn leather vest and a faded Stetson. She was diminutive, clear-eyed and intelligent, and there was spirit in her voice. She wore gingham and her hands showed signs of hard work.

"You're a stranger," she said.

"I am," he admitted. "Just this minute hit town."

"I'll tell my brother and he might look you up. He'll be very thankful for what you did. I hope you like the town."

"I hope so, ma'am."

She smiled again in farewell. It was a smile in which was both pleasure and a faintly wistful regret. Then she was gone, setting off up the street toward the open prairie, brown in the summer sun.

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly sauntered over to the Golden Rule saloon. Beneath his casual air he was estimating the mood of the gang before him and its probable influence on his errand in town. He had trod on their toes. And was glad he had done so. Jack o' Diamonds did not like the town of Larkspur.

Larkspur was the center of a great range which was going through those growing pains which at one time or another have afflicted every part of the cattle country. The big outfits had come to regard the public domain as theirs for exclusive use, and the settler and little rancher who tried to share its vast potential wealth found himself facing ruin. Resistance only increased the fury of the forces arrayed against him.

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly knew to the full the measure of their arrogance. A hundred miles to the south he had

settled on a corner of a range, and with his partner, Slim Gorman, had labored mightily for a year that their dream of independence might be fulfilled. The year of hope and sacrifice was set at naught in one brief night. Jack o' Diamonds, by merest chance, was not home at the time. He returned next morning—and found their corrals burned, the sod house blown up, and his partner shot dead in the ranch yard. The judgment of the big outfits had been executed.

A hatred and a fury abided with the soul of Calverly after that. He abandoned the ranch and he sought to find the killers. He did not immediately succeed, and his enemies, recognizing the menace he might prove to be, framed him on a rustling charge. He fled the country, knowing that defense was hopeless. And in another State, by merest chance, he happened on a disgruntled cowboy, lately fired from the largest outfit neighboring on the partners' claim. This puncher, by way of venting his spleen, disclosed to Jack o' Diamonds the details of the raid and the name of the leader of the gang of hired killers brought in for the job.

Northward Jack o' Diamonds flew next morning. He revisited his own country and skulked about it for days, an outlaw in fear of his life. The killers had not remained in the country, but presently he learned that the leader of the pack, "Sacaton Bill" Sturgis, had been reported in Larkspur, still farther north. To Larkspur he raced, and he was not surprised to learn, through casual encounters on the trail, that the whole Larkspur range was simmering over the fires of imminent war.

This very morning, in the fog-drenched hills, he had suddenly come upon a line rider standing motionless beside the trail. They passed the time of day, and the other casually warned him against entering Larkspur. Word had come up in advance, it seemed, that the man Jack o' Diamonds was heading north for trouble. Larkspur was looking forward to his arrival. Strangers, now, might innocently run into accidents. You never could tell.

The rider in the hills left Jack o' Diamonds with plenty of food for thought. Briefly he considered turning back, but the hatred and the fury still abided with him, and his soul rebelled. He went on. He was unknown in Larkspur. He could ride into town and settle his plans later; they were vague, at best. It was an urge, a necessity, that drew him north, rather than any definite plan.

As he walked across the road to the Golden Rule saloon, Jack o' Diamonds thought of these things and hummed to himself his odd, contented tune.

One of the gang had moved. He was a big man, heavy of frame and dark of face. His eyes were black and opaque as night. Power was in the set of his shoulders, and the ruthlessness to back it in the set of his pale, unpleasant lips. He wore riding clothes that showed no sign of hard usage. He had taken a stand in the saloon doorway, and he leaned with one outthrust arm against the door jamb, blocking passage.

Jack o' Diamonds passed through the group of loungers and approached the door. He stopped there and calmly surveyed the big man opposing his entry.

"Well?" he said inquiringly.

The big man grunted and his lip curled.

"How long you known that gal?" he demanded.

"Long enough to claim acquaintance the next time we meet," Calverly said blandly. "About two minutes and a dozen seconds."

The other grunted again, studying him.

"Having supplied which information," Jack o' Diamonds continued in a subtly altered voice, "suppose you supply me with information relating to your right to ask, stranger?"

The big man's eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Don't look too close for information, cowboy. Yuu might find it and not especially like it. Where you from?"

"Where I'm going's more to the point. I'll tell you without being asked. In there. To the bar. Understand?"

"I understand. But you'll go when I let you, cowboy."

JACK O' DIAMONDS breathed deeply, then exhaled sharply. They stood eye to eye, big men both, and the set of one jaw was not outdone by the determination in the other. Calverly knew that retreat was out of the question even if he cared to withdraw. This gunman was bent on settling the suspicions in his mind, and he cared not at all whether the stranger

liked the process or not. Jack o' Diamonds looked about, passing over the still, watchful audience on the porch and letting his gaze sweep up and down the empty, sunlit street. His eye fell on an instrument whose purpose he could not fathom, but which caught his attention. It was a large iron hoop, similar to, but larger and much heavier than, a wagon wheel tire. It hung suspended from a wooden frame close to the sidewalk a short distance along the street.

"That ring of railroad iron or whatever it is," said Jack o' Diamonds to the big man in the doorway. "What's it for?"

The other cast a glance at the object. He was suspicious.

"That's the new town fire alarm. There's a hammer alongside. What's that got to do with this?"

"Plenty!" snapped Calverly. "Where I come from we wear them for collars. Wrapped twice around your neck it'd just about fit, I reckon. And by Godfrey, if you don't get out of that doorway, Mister, I aim to find out!"

"Yeah?" drawled the other, his voice harsh with menace. His face was ugly. His hand fell abruptly to his gun.

Then an expression of extreme astonishment flitted briefly over his face and was gone, leaving it as expressionless as stone. He went perfectly still, looking at Calverly, the hand still on the holstered gun. Jack o' Diamonds had been ready for the play. His own hand, idle near his weapon, had flashed it up and to a level with a movement as swift as thought. Its muzzle prodded into the big man's middle.

"You don't want no gunplay just now, stranger," he said softly. "You maybe thought so for a second or two, but you were mistaken. Take your hand off that gun. Get away from that door. Vamoose!"

The dark man let his hand fall from the gun butt. His eyes were smoldering with smothered flames. He looked at Calverly a moment longer, then stepped from the door to one side, and with jaw set in rigid knots of muscle, gave his attention to the manufacture of a cigarette.

Jack o' Diamonds paused in the doorway to survey the porch.

"I came to this town peaceable," he said with slow significance, "and if so inclined I aim to leave the same way—if I have to shoot up six or seven guntoting hombres to prove it. Keep that in mind and maybe we'll get along."

He met their concentrated, inimical gaze with a stare as steady as their own, and as chill. Then he pushed inside and let the doors swing shut behind him. Only a low, sibilant oath broke the profound silence on the porch.

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly, oddly enough, was trembling. It was not with weakness; it was rather with an access of strength. In far, profound depths of his being a storm was raging. He stood up to the bar and demanded a whisky, and the barkeep served him, briskly and in silence. There was no one else in the room. Jack o' Diamonds knew why without being told. The gang had been assembled here until one of their number had happened to observe the arrival in town of the girl in gingham. Thereupon they had gone outside to give her the full benefit of their hostile regard.

A number of things were suddenly clear to Jack Calverly. He considered them grimly. He fixed his gaze on the bland, rotund bartender and studied the man. The barkeep, unmoved, continued his endless task of polishing his immaculate glasses. His thoughts, his sympathies, were unreadable.

"That big fellow outside," Calverly said suddenly. "Who is he?"

"Name's Sturgis," the bartender answered promptly. "Sacaton Bill Sturgis. Working for the Domino brand. Biggest cattle outfit this side of the North Fork."

"All of which should have occurred to me at once," said Calverly. "And that girl they were giving the snake eye to—who's she?"

"Rose Sutler. Lives ten miles out with her brother on Beaver Creek."

"Nester gal, eh?"

"So some calls her," the other said noncommittally.

"I see," said Jack o' Diamonds Calverly. He turned his back to the bar and leaned against it, looking somberly over the swinging doors out on the sunlit day.

It had come at last, that moment which for months had been his goal. It seemed unreal. He needed to remember again that hour when he had stood beside the murdered body of Slim Gorman in the dawn,

staring with stark, dry eyes at the trail along which the killers had come and gone. He needed to remember the loyalty and the affection, the trust and the strength they had shared, those two, during their months of grueling labor. He needed to remember the dreams that were gone, the hopes that were so futile, the gallant life that had so wantonly been ended. And remembering, living again the grim torment of that hour in the dawn, this moment in Larkspur no longer was unreal.

He stood away from the bar. In his eyes was the cold blue of limitless space. For a moment he paused, balanced on widespread feet like a fighter ready to give or receive a blow, then he took a slow, deep breath and strode for the swinging doors.

OUTSIDE on the porch the gang still lingered. But Sacaton Bill Sturgis was not among them. Jack Calverly looked at them a little more attentively, listening to the curt sarcasms which served for conversation. This time they chose to ignore him. They lounged indolently on tilted chairs or perched on the porch railing, and not one of them looked his way. Their nonchalance was too elaborate. Something was in the wind, and they were acting in concert to achieve it. Subtlety was not their game, Jack Calverly knew; they were mature, case-hardened, conscienceless killers. It was up to him to force their hand.

"Where's Sturgis?" he demanded.

One or two looked at him idly, veiled venom in their gaze.

"Gone for a walk, cowboy," offered one, "somewheres down the street."

Jack o' Diamonds stepped to the front of the porch. He looked up and down the sun-bleached length of the town's main thoroughfare. A few stray citizens were in sight, but Sturgis was not among them. Sheer force of habit led Jack to glance along the hitch rail adjoining the saloon —and his heart beat a sudden signal of alarm. His horse was no longer where he had left it; the animal was nowhere in sight along the street. He turned abruptly on the gang.

"Where's that pony of mine?" he snarled.

"He's went for a walk, too," the speaker informed him calmly. "Down to the corral at the end of the street."

"With Sturgis?"

"Not necessarily. You'll find him there, safe and sound. But I'd advise you to go call on Deputy Sheriff Ben Thatcher at the firehouse before touching him."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"There's been a claim," the man explained dryly, "that that there pony is a stolen horse. Ben Thatcher's holding him for proof of ownership. I reckon it's just a formality."

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing so that they shone like points of fire between the shaded lids. He stood still a moment, then stepped from the porch and headed determinedly up the street along the plank sidewalk. He was some distance away when he heard, or thought he heard, behind him a whistled tune in which there were distinct overtones of ironic mockery. It was, if his senses served him, his own "Jack o' Diamonds."

Deputy Sheriff Ben Thatcher presided over an establishment which was Larkspur's latest and most outstanding point of civic pride. It was a low, wide frame building near one end of Main Street, between the blacksmith shop and a Chinese restaurant. It was painted red, and there were bars on every window. The bars in the rear, being those of the town lock-up and intended to keep people inside, were much heavier than those to the front, which were intended only to keep interlopers outside and to maintain the dignity of the establishment. The front half of the building housed the deputy's office and the new fire apparatus, a hand force pump and two hose carts. A substantial wall divided the jail pen from the firehouse, and a barred, grilled door led between. Deputy Sheriff Thatcher, in his dual role as peace officer and fire marshal, ruled his little domain with a pride and righteousness tempered by a proper understanding of political expediency. Since there were few arrests and fewer fires, the canny Thatcher had little to worry about. The key to the jail pen hung on a hook over the deputy's desk, and the door of the firehouse was always open to the first volunteer to respond when the iron ring in the center of town sounded its clarion call.

JACK O' DIAMONDS CALVERLY walked in the open doors of the firehouse and straight up to the deputy's desk against one wall. Thatcher sat idle, as though waiting for something, and he expressed no surprise. Calverly stood silent a moment, looking at the officer. They appraised each other, the cowboy with challenge, the deputy guardedly, reservedly, as befitted a man of middle years and few illusions.

"I'm told to see you to find out how come about my horse," said Jack o' Diamonds with a flat emphasis.

"Yes?" said Ben Thatcher. "What do you want to know about the horse?"

"Who's making this claim he's a stolen pony?"

The deputy tapped judicious fingers on his desk. He reflected.

"That's something I reckon I'll keep private, pending the outcome of my investigation," he announced. "Ain't no formal charges been made yet. Nothing for you to worry about, I reckon. I just aim to see the bill of sale this other fellow claims he can produce."

"Then what?" demanded Calverly.

"Then we'll see."

Contempt and anger crept over Jack o' Diamonds' face.

"Oh, yeah?" he said in a slow, harsh drawl. There was nothing more to say or ask. He needed no more information. The purpose of all this was plain.

His identity was unknown, but he had promptly revealed himself in town as a person to be reckoned with. He might be the Jack o' Diamonds whose elusiveness was rapidly becoming a legend—and he might be one of several other things: United States Marshal, range detective, a professional gunman hired by the nesters. By impounding his horse on a trumped-up suspicion of theft, they handicapped him and provoked him to a possible disclosure of his identity. The Larkspur range faced serious war, and no unknown element was to be ignored. They were very canny—and very confident of their ability to handle his problem.

Jack o' Diamonds saw the futility of further argument just then. He snorted suddenly and turned on his heel and strode through the doors of the firehouse. He almost collided with two hard-eyed individuals on the sidewalk who had not been present on his arrival here. They stopped and looked at him, silent and challenging. He studied them briefly, then stepped from the sidewalk and headed diagonally up the street toward the pole inclosure which was the public corral. The two men fell into step behind him.

The gang did not intend to let him get out of their sight evidently. Jack o' Diamonds smiled grimly. It was a fair enough arrangement. He did not wish that they should vanish either. Sturgis had disappeared; later he must be found, and this pair might help. First of all, since his life in this town might depend on a ready horse, this matter must be settled. He proposed to settle it as informally as his enemies.

THE animal was in the corral, herding in a corner with half a dozen others. As Jack o' Diamonds walked in the gate, he whistled, and the horse nickered and promptly deserted his companions. He came trotting up to his master eagerly, a lean, long-legged roan with thoroughbred ancestry in his every line.

"And they expect to take you away from me, you Cannonball horse!" he said to the beast, rubbing his nose. "Just figure that!" He looked about the corral. His saddle and bridle hung with a row of other gear on a pole at the rear of the inclosure. A youngster in his teens was adjusting a nose bag to a horse in one corner; he was probably hostler here. The pair from the saloon had stopped at the corral gate to watch. He turned his back on them.

"You come along with me," Calverly ordered his mount with decision. He walked toward the row of saddles. The animal trotted after him.

The youngster came running up as Jack o' Diamonds lifted the saddle from its perch.

"Hey, you can't take that, cowboy!" he declared tensely. "That horse and outfit stay here on the deputy's orders."

"No jurisdiction," snapped Calverly. "I'm countermanding the orders."

"You can't take it, I'm telling you!"

"Think you can stop me, kid?"

The youth did not answer. He looked past Jack o' Diamonds. The two men from the Golden Rule had left the gate and

were crossing the corral with grim deliberation. Jack o' Diamonds glanced at them over his shoulder. He caught the cinch in its buckle, but he did not draw it. Instead, he waited.

"Put up that saddle, cowboy!" one of the pair called. They separated, passing either side of the horse. They put Jack o' Diamonds between them. The hostler had no more to say and backed away gingerly.

"Who expects to make me?" demanded Jack o' Diamonds. He stood tensely still beside his horse, his body in a half crouch and his hands free.

"Me, for one!" said the man. "A couple dozen others if need be."

"Go get them! You'll need them. I'm taking this horse out of here."

"By the eternal Judas, you'll put that saddle back!"

The man's right forearm snapped like a semaphore at his side, and his gun leaped from the holster. Jack o' Diamonds, bent low, had his gun out as the other moved and fired first, shooting point-blank from the hip. He could not miss. The heavy .44 slug tore paralyzingly into the gunman's vitals. He dropped in his tracks with a choked cry. And he didn't rise again.

Jack o' Diamonds shouted and struck the Cannonball horse on the rump with his gun barrel. The animal snorted explosively and leaped forward. The second gunman, his weapon free and seeking its target, was almost thrown down by unexpected collison with the horse. He staggered backward, cursing, and fired blindly as the animal sprang past. Jack o' Diamonds had not moved; the bullet missed him widely. He leveled his gun and sent a second slug into the pulsing throat of the killer. The man died where he stood and toppled over heavily in the thick dust.

Jack o' Diamonds ignored the first of the killers, who groveled in agony on the ground, out of action. He spun on his heel and confronted the hostler with his weapon.

"Your oar in this too?" he snarled.

The hostler was backed against the corral posts. His hands were in the air and his face was white and twitching.

"I ain't in it, cowboy! Honest to God! I ain't got a gun."

"Don't ever carry any," said Jack o' Diamonds grimly. "You can see what comes of it. Beat it and keep your mouth shut. If I see you with any of them, I'll give you what you're just escaping now. Get going!"

The boy got going with desperate zeal, sliding through the poles and making off among the adjoining houses.

The gunfire had not gone unnoticed in the town. Jack o' Diamonds heard hoarse shouts somewhere up the street, and the pounding of swift heels on the hollow planks of the sidewalk. He broke into a run for the inner corner of the inclosure nearest the center of town. There he eased through the poles. A man came running into view on the street. The man had his gun out, and he took one swift survey of the situation and sent a bullet streaking after Calverly. Jack o' Diamonds replied with one hasty shot and plunged into a narrow alley that passed along the rear of the row of business establishments on Main Street.

He reloaded as he ran, and as he reloaded considered. He had no chance to plead immunity on the grounds of self-defense. The gang would be satisfied now. He had not revealed any official identity, but had chosen to fight. He would be, they knew, no one but Jack o' Diamonds, for whose reception they were foregathered in Larkspur. Jack o' Diamonds was grimly satisfied himself. Sacaton Bill Sturgis, as cautious as he was ruthless, had removed himself from sight while the identification was established, so that he might not inadvertently murder an officer. But with that possibility removed, Sacaton Bill Sturgis would be abroad and on kill. And Jack o' Diamonds Calverly proposed to find him.

He identified the Golden Rule saloon from the rear and approached it with some caution. No one was in sight, however, and he reached the door giving on the alley without mishap. He pressed close against it and turned the knob slowly and silently. A soft click told him it was free. He thrust it open and stepped inside.

He found himself in a rear room, still and empty. A large, round table and a number of chairs were its only furnishing; it was for the private drinking or gambling. He crossed the room and listened at the other door.

He heard nothing that gave him a hint what might be on the other side. Gripping the knob, he repeated the performance, opening the door without a sound. He pushed it slightly ajar, disclosing a sector of the barroom. No one was in view. Opening the door widely, he strode into the room.

Two men were at a front window, and the bartender leaned over the end of his bar. They were absorbed in the events taking place down the street.

He stepped to the swinging doors and looked outside. Below at the corral a milling crowd was gathered. Along the street, the town had suddenly come to life; merchants stood excitedly in doorways and heads peered from windows. Not a soul in Larkspur had failed to hear the sudden alarm of those shots in the corral, and not a soul misread their meaning.

SOMETHING caused Jack o' Diamonds to spin in his tracks like a spring released. He did not identify what instinctive warning caused him to move, and as he turned he did not need to. The bartender was in the act of swinging over the bar the blunt muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun, and on his face was a triumphant snarl.

Calverly's weapon was on the target as he sighted it, and he fired instantly. The shotgun exploded with a roar and discharged its murderous load into the ceiling. The barkeep coughed sharply and disappeared behind his bar with a crash of glassware. Silence followed.

Jack o' Diamonds felt no compunction over the barkeep's end, but alarm came to him because the shots had advertised his whereabouts. He looked out on the street. Faces were turned in wonder toward the Golden Rule, and down the street a knot of men broke away from the gathering about the corral gate and charged up the sidewalk to investigate.

Calverly uttered an oath beneath his breath, an oath of desperation. There was no fear in it, but there was anger, fierce and resentful. Sacaton Bill Sturgis was not with the oncoming gang, was not anywhere in sight. They would hole him up here before he had his chance to face the leader of the pack.

Stepping into plain view on the saloon porch, Jack o' Diamonds aimed his gun at arm's length on the charging gang and opened fire as fast as he could pull trigger. This reckless maneuver was instantly effective. The gang scattered for cover, and all along the street the tense audience of the battle vanished abruptly into open doorways. Angry bullets began to tear into the woodwork of the porch.

Jack o' Diamonds backed into the doorway, reloading. The two townsmen stood against the wall as though paralyzed. A tense silence followed the thunder of gunfire. Jack o' Diamonds paused, desperate and uncertain, every nerve quivering. Behind him was the empty alley; before him the street filled with enemies. He moved with sudden decision and swung shut the two winter doors which supplemented the swinging doors, throwing the bolt as they slammed. The gang could break the glass, but their progress would be held up for a moment. Then he made for the rear doors at a run.

His first impression as he leaped into the alley was, it was still empty. At one end it was. But from the direction of the corral a man was advancing, grimly and with a deliberation that announced an unswerving purpose. Jack o' Diamonds froze at sight of him, and waves of emotion both hot and cold played over his rigid body. The oncoming man was Sacaton Bill Sturgis, gun in hand and blood lust in his eye. He was advancing as he had advanced many times before in his ruthless career, with the dead certainty in his heart that a man was about to die.

Equally certain was Jack o' Diamonds Calverly that a man would here meet his Maker. The blood coursed swiftly through his veins with a mighty exultation, and the roaring in his ears was a chant of death. A boon had been granted and a destiny was to be fulfilled. Face to face, alone in a shabby little cowtown alley, the partner of Slim Gorman and his murderer stared together over the brink of eternity.

Beyond these buildings, on the street, sounded passionate, reckless cries and a scattering of aimless gunfire. Here was silence. Sacaton Bill Sturgis advanced steadily, and a leering, remorseless grin bared his hard white teeth. Catlike, Jack o' Diamonds began a stealthy walk to meet him.

Suddenly Sturgis' gun leveled at his side and spat a long jet of thunderous flame. Something touched Jack o' Diamonds' hat as like a whip lash, knocking it askew. His lips compressed to a pale, thin line, and his eyes were like flakes of blue glass in the sunlight. He went on, his gun silent.

Sturgis fired again. The grin was gone and his jaw was hard with knotted muscle. An invisible string tugged at Jack o' Diamonds' sleeve, and there was a tear in the fabric. Immediately after a dark wet stain began to spread on the sleeve. Jack o' Diamonds went on. A deathlike silence filled the place.

They held their fire then, steadily closing in. Step by step, they made death more certain. They were twenty yards apart when Sacaton Bill came to a halt. He breathed deeply, his eyes swimming with fury beneath heavy brows, and brought up his gun with sights deliberately aligned.

Jack o' Diamonds took another steady step, then stopped dead. His own weapon flashed upward. The two guns exploded together. The dingy little alley trembled with the stunning tattoo of death.

Then it was over and there was an aching silence on all Larkspur. All too plainly that rolling gunfire had announced the passing of a man. In the alley the two stood for a second, motionless and erect. Sacaton Bill Sturgis let fall his empty gun. He turned about uncertainly and stared with glassy, visionless eyes along the way he had come. He took a single, lurching step, and then stopped. A convulsive spasm shot through his great frame, and he suddenly threw up his hands as though to recapture the breath that fled from his body. He fell forward into the dust with blood on his lips and the seal of death affixed on his ashen face.

Jack o' Diamonds had not moved. He stared at the body in the dust with eyes in which they was no human emotion. If the spirit of Slim Gorman walked the earth, he would henceforth not walk alone. The night could pass and the day come, and the dawn would now bring peace instead of a silent torment.

A sudden, passionate cry ended the silence. Jack o' Diamonds looked up the alley toward the corral. A number of men came into view. Their eyes swept the alley and then they broke into a run toward him, brandishing weapons as they came.

Jack o' Diamonds turned to the other end of the alley. That, too, was closed off; men were pouring into it to close in on him. On one side of him was the solid rear of a bank building; on the other, a high wooden fence. He sprinted for the Golden Rule saloon.

IT was a slender chance, but one worth taking. If the saloon door still held, he could reach the street unimpeded and there leap on a horse and run for it. His task was accomplished; there remained but to escape.

He reached the saloon door at a plunging run, and swinging into it, ran full tilt into a charging mob.

They seized him even as he recoiled from them; desperately they clutched at him, clinging fiercely and cursing as they fought him. He struggled savagely to free himself, flailing about with the heavy barrel of his gun, cursing hoarsely in return. They boiled about him, hanging on his arms, clinging to his neck, bearing him down by sheer overpowering weight of numbers. They possessed his gun; they bore him to earth; they held him captive there finally, panting and mad of eye and powerless to resist further. He was their prisoner. He bared his teeth and cursed them and defied them to undo what he had wrought.

A man plunged through the gathering crowd. They made way when they saw it was Deputy Sheriff Ben Thatcher.

"You got him there?" the officer was shouting. "Good work! Hold him!"

"Good work, me left foot!" cried a voice. "He's needing a bullet!"

"Bullet, nothin'!" rasped another, more sinister voice. "He'll get his needin's—a rope!"

Jack o' Diamonds Calverly lay without moving. He stared up into the face of the deputy with hot, undefeated eyes. Ben Thatcher produced a pair of manacles with officious clatter, and he stared back at the prisoner with a vindictive expression of grim and vengeful satisfaction.

Slowly the hours of that afternoon ran out their time. Over all Larkspur lay an ominous quiet, filled with a sense of waiting for something dire that was yet to come. The lone prisoner in the town lock-

up paced to and fro steadily through the hours, unable to relax, knowing full well the measure of vengeance the town planned.

They were waiting for moonrise. Grimly he was resigned to it. He knew their minds, their moods and their manners, and he could recognize the signs. When the great moon rose over the horizon not long after dark, they would ride forth, bearing in their midst the prisoner they had torn from the jail after its keeper had made the formality of a protest. Somewhere outside town a rope would be thrown over a cottonwood limb. A noose would be adjusted, a horse slapped so that he would spring suddenly from beneath—and Jack o' Diamonds would become a silent, swaying shadow in the long night.

WELL, let them come! He had fulfilled his desire, had evened his score. Had he his choice, he would have preferred to go down fighting. Since he hadn't, he would take his medicine. It was in the cards. He sang softly:

> You Jack o' Diamonds,
> Oh, you Jack o' Diamonds—
> What you ridin' for to see tonight?

Deputy Sheriff Thatcher remained in the fore part of the combined jail and firehouse all that afternoon. Occasionally he had a visitor, but mostly he was alone. The reason was evident. No shadow of complicity must rest on him after the night was over. Each time he passed the door of his roomy pen, Calverly gave the deputy an ironic glance.

It was dusk, and the town was stirring restlessly like an animal awakening from sleep when Ben Thatcher had a visitor unlike any other that day. She walked into the firehouse with determined tread, and she presented herself to the deputy with no compromise in her manner. Jack o' Diamonds sprang to the barred door at the sound of her voice, and was astonished to recognize Rose Sutler, the girl he had aided that day on Main Street.

He did not hear what she told the deputy after the first few words. She lowered her voice, evidently desirous that he should not hear her message. It was a demand for something, and the officer heard her out and then shook his head. She argued, and he remained firm. She pleaded, and his face grew coldly stubborn. She stood erect before him, gained control of her rising anger, and looked at him.

"So you won't do a thing to stop this before it gets too late, Mr. Thatcher?" she said. "I reckon I know why. You can't live on county pay alone, can you, a man in your position? You figure to keep in with the Domino outfit at any cost, don't you? Well, you're making a mistake—and you're going to find that out plenty at the next election." She looked toward the grilled door and at Jack o' Diamonds behind it. "Hello, cowboy," she said. "I'm sorry," she added gently.

He smiled.

"It don't matter much, ma'am," he said. "I got what I come here for."

"Jack o' Diamonds, eh?" she said. She smiled enigmatically, glanced at the glowering deputy, and abruptly walked out of the building into the deepening dusk.

Swiftly the night came on, increasing with each minute. Lamps appeared in the shop windows along Main Street—but not too many near the lock-up. There was a scurrying, a stealthy activity about town that came only with the darkness.

Then suddenly the heart of Larkspur skipped a beat as a deep, iron clangor throbbed and swelled in the night. It was a summons more imperious than any feud or any passion. Its beat echoed on the ear drums, trembled along taut nerves. It rolled and reverberated, that clangor that clanged its metallic alarm to the defense of tinder-dry homes, of dried feed-piled barns.

The alarm ceased, but the town was now aroused. To the east of the town, and to windward, a flickering glow served notice of the fire's location. The citizenry turned in a body and ran for the firehouse.

Jack o' Diamonds watched them through the iron bars. There was a good deal of confusion. The firehouse was new, the apparatus was new, and the volunteer firemen were new to their task. Heretofore a line of buckets had served any emergency; the new pump and hose were to prove their value for the first time. The crowd dragged the carts out of the house, milled about them in the street a moment, and then set off for the east end of town with a great yell. The sound of their

progress receded, and in a few minutes the firehouse was deserted and silent.

Rose Sutler darted suddenly into the house from the shadows outside. She ran to the deputy's desk. Above the desk was the hook on which hung the lock-up key. She snatched at it.

"You ready, cowboy?" she demanded.

Jack o' Diamonds gripped the bars tensely.

"Ready for what?"

"You're going out!" The girl was at the grilled door; she thrust the big key in the heavy lock, turned it, and the door swung open. "Come along with me," she commanded.

He went first to the desk against the wall. He had seen the deputy put away his gun belt in a drawer. It was still there when he opened it. He slung it about his waist, and ran after the disappearing girl.

No one saw them leave the building. That part of Larkspur was deserted. Rose Sutler led the way up the street a short distance, and then through a narrow space between two buildings to a dark alley in the rear. Jack o' Diamonds made out a tethered horse in the obscurity. The horse nickered softly.

"Cannonball!" he said. "You roan devil!"

"I rustled him out of the corral," said the girl. "He'll carry you a long way tonight. Make for the north. Head over the lavas. The moon will show the way and they'll never trail you."

He left the horse and turned to her. He was eager, tense; his unexpected freedom was a heady wine to his senses. The girl stood still and quiet, looking at him; he could see her face as a white petal glowing softly in the darkness. He trembled a little with strange, unknown emotions.

"How come this, ma'am?" he asked. "I don't exactly understand."

"You Jack o' Diamonds!" she said softly. "I've heard of you. You helped me today. Word came down the valley of what you did here this noon. I could help you tonight. I rode in at sundown. I set fire to an old shack outside town and rang out the alarm."

He looked at her steadily.

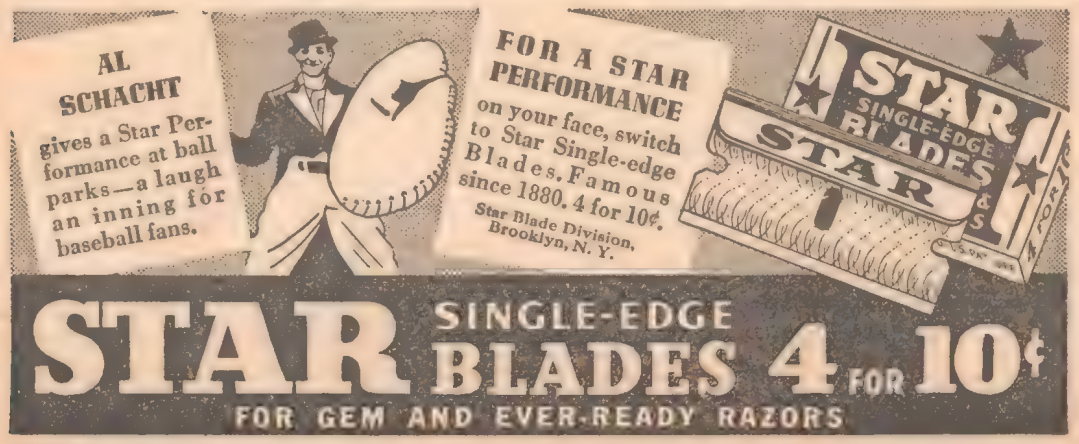
"I reckon I can't ever forget this, Miss Rose."

"Don't, cowboy! You busted that Domino gang wide open today. Us valley folk won't forget that either. There's an election coming next month. My brother's running for sheriff, and he's going to win. You'll be free to come back then—if you care to!"

"I'll be back," he said quickly. He pressed her hand, holding it tightly. Then he said, "Be waiting for me, Rose," and ran abruptly to the waiting horse.

Cannonball wheeled, eager to be off, and with a scattering of gravel, set out up the alley at a gallop. Before them the north star hung like a beacon over the tangled lavas. A snatch of song, victorious and exultant, echoed over the town of Larkspur.

You Jack o' Diamonds,
Oh, you Jack o' Diamonds—
Who you ridin' for to see tonight?
Who you meetin' in the pale moonlight,
Red Jack o' Diamonds?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SADDLE-BUM

By BART CASSIDY

One weakness that gun-for-hire saddle-bum owned to. Hell-or-high-water, when he gave his word he kept it—even to a range-wolf of hungry Hamsmith's ilk!

"IT takes two to make a quarrel—" said the heavy rancher.

"But only one to finish her off!" The green-eyed man leaned his elbow on the battered desk and looked straight at Hamsmith with disconcerting directness.

"But I won't quarrel with you over price." Hamsmith licked flabby lips and dry-washed his fat hands. He shifted, turned to the window facing the dirty little street, looking out of the corners of his shifty little eyes at the slender, lean-faced man. Hamsmith seemed unable to look directly at the other. Maybe it was because that green-eyed young man was Gila Gaines.

Gila Gaines! From the 'dobe holes below the Mexican border to the Flint Hills of Kansas and the Snowies of Montana that name meant something. It brought to mind stories of a spitting, bone-handled Colt—and death. A wandering saddle tramp whose gun was for hire. Trouble was his trade; Death the end of the job that got him his pay.

Some cursed him, but a greater number sang his praise. For Gila Gaines, strange to say, was little more than a roving officer of peace who worked without the law. His gun was for hire, yes. But never to those who fought an unjust cause. He was particular—very.

"I may have blood on my hands," he'd say, his voice sharp, the words quick-spoken and clipped, as they always were, "but, thank heaven, I ain't got no dirt on them!"

A man who enjoyed baiting the other man before he killed him; who could see below the surface—in fact, the sort of man who would live long at even the dangerous calling that was his.

"No," Hamsmith wheezed, "we won't quarrel about price. I own the Sinks and Coulee Springs. I bought up all the range around them. Now, these little outfits are

claiming I ain't [illegible] right to the water. And they're tryi[illegible] run me off my own grass. They've killed two of my foremen that I put out on the Box H. Bunch of gun-slinging devils from Arizona, those little ranchers. Curse the day they ever picked this part of Wyoming to squat in!"

"They got a gunman; and you want me to get him out of the way—that it?" Gila put the question flatly. "You won't be able to have peace until their best man is out of it, settling this little grass war. All right, show me that you're really entitled to this land, and I'll take the job—for two thousand dollars."

"But—hell!" Hamsmith objected. "I got Baldy Crouse on the job for a promise of only five hundred."

At the mention of Baldy Crouse, Gila stiffened. His name was ranked with Gila's when swift gun-slinging was discussed. Only, his gun was for hire to any cause that would pay. Gila thought back to a few years before. To a meeting with Baldy Crouse, and a treacherous shot that came from a side door of a saloon—Baldy's hidden friends. And Gila's aim had been spoiled. He carried a puckery bullet hole in his shoulder as a result of that meeting.

"You get their fast man out of the way," said Hamsmith, "and I'll pay it. Yes, settle all this, and pay you five thousand. Baldy, he don't seem to be doing so well. Maybe the two of you—"

"No!" Gila shook his head. A funny, burning light seemed to leap into his queer green eyes; the faint trace of a sarcastic, amused smile played on his thin lips.

"Here," Hamsmith urged, pressing a roll of bills on him. "Here's a thousand in advance. I know you stay with a man after you give your word. You'll stick with me? I give you my word everything's all right. I—"

"Your word ain't worth a damn, Hamsmith," Gila barked. He snatched the roll of bills and crammed them in his pocket. "But I give you my word, I'll get their fastest man out of the way and I'll settle this whole business."

He seemed to glide, so silently and smoothly did he leave the dingy town office of the land shark and owner of the Box H. Hamsmith blinked rapidly at the closed door. Then, a slobbery smile played on his big lips.

"I heard you was smart," he grunted. "Huh. It takes a guy with brains to beat me. Guts don't near do it. You'll never bend a bankroll by bending a gun!"

GILA put his black down into the coulee and pulled up at a small shack that was built beside a spring branch. Four saddled horses turned their rumps to the dry wind that whistled down around the place. Gila yelled and swung down.

"Got bus'ness here, hombre?"

Gila looked up. Standing in the door of the shack, hand on the butt of his .45, a bleak-faced young cowboy eyed him without favor. His eyes traveled swiftly over the form of the newcomer, taking in the low-swung gun in the oiled holster, and the long-fingered, tapering hands that were never still. Gunman, he ticketed Gila, and was right.

"Got business." Gila nodded, stopping before the cowboy when the latter made no move to budge out of the door. "Yeah, got business. Got to kill a man. Want to be sure I find the right one."

"Damn'f you ain't a cool one!" the puncher snarled. "You gunnin' saddle bum!"

"And I just want to be sure the man I want ain't out here around one of these little spreads around the Sink or Coulee Springs," Gila finished.

"You mean—" the words were bitter and the man in the door crouched slightly—"you come to make sure you finished poor ol' Kempie. Well, damn your gunie hide, you didn't! Slug jest missed his lung. Maybe you can do to me what you did to Kempie—from the back with a rifle."

"HOLD it!"

Snapped, terse, the words stopped the puncher from going for his gun. He raised his voice as he spoke. Another man appeared in the door behind the other.

"Hell—Gila!" he blurted. The young puncher turned to look at the man behind him.

"That's Gila Gaines. Damn' cinch it weren't him thet put th' slug in Kempie from th' ridge. Gila, damn your old bones, you ain't mixed up in this mess, are yuh?"

"Howdy Chet," Gila brushed by the man in the door and shook hands. "No, not mixed up in it yet. Getting my feet wet,

though. Got to get straightened out. That him?" he dropped his voice low and jerked a thumb at a moaning, tossing figure on a bunk in a corner.

Chet Wrangle, who had known Gila Gaines in Texas and had saddled with him in a sheep war in Montana, shook his head. "Yeah. Some damn' skunk whacked him from th' back this mornin'. An' I ain't makin' no beans when I say I know thet damn' Baldy gunie done it!

"Damn it, Gila, we ain't had nothin' but fightin' since we all joined up an' come in here to start spreads of our own, year ago! We went intuh records an' proved thet this buzzard Hamsmith done got all th' range around water. Didn't think anyone'd dare come in an' sit their tails in th' middle uh him, he didn't.

"Well, this is ourn, an' we're holdin' her. We done smacked off two his men, an' lost one our own. Kempie, he was our best hand with uh gun. He—"

"That's it, then," Gila nodded. "But how in hell do you know for sure Baldy Crouse did it?"

"Who else would?" Chet demanded, bristling. "Damn' dirty skunk. After he handed on as uh gunie for Hamsmith, he comes over here. Wants tuh make terms with us, he did. Said, for five hundred, he'd jest lay low, an' stay offa us. Kempie kicked his errin' tail, an' sent him hikin'. They may do business thet way in Wyomin', but damn' if this bunch uh poor waddies from Arizony does. Nope, we'll fight!"

"Nope, doggone it, you won't!" Gila told him.

An amused glitter shone in Gila's eyes. The little wrinkles in his forehead deepened and the ironic trace of a smile was on his lips.

"NOPE," Gila repeated, "you won't fight. Leastways, not yet. Tell you what, Chet. You hombres are going to hire this Baldy buzzard. No—wait," as Chet started to swear loudly. "If you remember, up out of Havre, Montana, the time Baldy had a man planted to shoot me when we was fixing to have it out, you'll know I ain't no friend of his. I owe him one, mister. And when I pay, one is all he's going to need.

"I ain't crazy, either. Now, listen, you cocky burr." Gila lowered his voice. Bub, ...e young puncher w... ...rred his way, and another old-tim... ...o came in at Chet's call, listened int... ...y. The look on Chet's seamed face, that told he'd thought Gila had gone batty, gave way to a look of deep appreciation.

"I done give this Hamsmith hog my word I'd shoot the best hogleg handler you little fellers got." Gila shrugged. "I get two thousand for that, and five thousand more to straighten this business out for good. Only, Hamsmith was so anxious to get me hired, he didn't lay down no rules how or which way I'd settle it. And I'm seeing now why Baldy wasn't getting nowhere—that polecat!

"I got to stick to my word to him. I never go back on it." Gila grinned wryly. "You do what I tell you. Clear this up, and get back for him." He nodded at the wounded man. "You can stomach Baldy, considering it's for a cause, can'tcha?"

"Well, yeah." Chet nodded. "But don't make us have th' smell uh him in our noses too long. *Sabe?*"

"I won't." Gila laughed harshly.

"Here." He handed Chet a roll of bills. "Spend it all. I'll damned sure get it back."

"Unh-huh!" Chet grunted, looking out the door after Gila as he rode back toward town. "Yuh'll git it back. An' I'm bettin' yuh don't fail tuh collect int'rest."

BALDY CROUSE was too sure of himself. So sure that he allowed Gila to step up beside him at the bar and touch him on the shoulder. Baldy whirled so quick that his sombrero jerked off his head, exposing his bald, dirty, scarred head. His snags of teeth showed as his lips drew back; his ratty eyes were glistening with fear, surprise and hate.

For a moment he was stunned, too stunned to do anything but gawp. It was as if he faced an apparition straight out of hell—a hell that would burn him down before he left his place at the bar. He was surprised still more—pleasantly so—when Gila Gaines grinned and spoke, making no move for his gun.

"Hello, Baldy. Have a little likker?"

Gila was a gun-bender. He was also a will-bender. He bent his will, although it was a strain, to be friendly. He wanted to send his lead smashing into the body of the other gunman. But that would not

suit his purpose[illegible]time for testing his skill with Baldy[illegible]the odds were even, was not yet.

"Forget that fracas we had in Montana." Gila smiled warmly. "Guess you was just the best. Maybe—" he stressed the word—"you still are. . . ." Just enough to plant desire for a showdown in Baldy's breast. And actions that would swell the other up with a sense of his own superiority.

"You and me, we're working for the same hombre." Gila held his glass to the light. "This ain't exactly the right time. Still, maybe you ain't better than me with your gun."

Gila kept his expression sober and a little puzzled. Baldy, mouth half open, looked at him queerly. Gila had him mixed up. First, he wanted to make friends, it seemed to Baldy. Then, after saying maybe Baldy was a better gunman, he questioned his own word.

"We ain't goin' to be workin' for the same hombre long!" Baldy whined. "I'm warnin' you. Aw, you go to hell!"

SOMEONE at a table across the saloon was motioning to Baldy. He was glad of the excuse to get away from Gila, whom he had believed clear down in Santa Fe. Smiling a little grimly, a look of keen enjoyment on his face, Gila sipped his drink slowly.

He saw Chet, who had motioned to Baldy, leaning across a table and talking earnestly to Baldy. He watched out of the corner of his eyes. Baldy accepted and pocketed the roll of bills Chet pushed across to him. The twisted, sneering grin was more pronounced. Chet had pushed his chair out from the table, and his gun was ready to hand.

Without hearing the words, Gila thought he could repeat almost what had been said between the two:

"When he starts to draw, let him have it." That would be the advice Baldy would give Chet to whom he'd just hired out. Gila had expected it to take several days to come to a head. Now—hope ran high. Baldy, hitching at his gun, was coming back to the bar.

"So you got a job with the same hombre as me, huh?" he snarled, stopping a few feet from Gila. "Told you we wouldn't be workin' for the same guy long. Me, I got a new job. Job's to wipe you out, you polekitty!"

"Wha-a-at?" Gila's eyes widened. The elbow that was leaning on the bar came off. Gila leaned toward Baldy, showing nothing but surprise, that covered any motions he made getting into position. "Aw, Baldy," Gila was pleading, "what've I done to you now?"

"I'm gettin' a thousand beans to plant you," Baldy snapped. He made no bones about it. Save for Chet and the barkeep, there were no others in the saloon. And the barkeep wouldn't open his mouth. He was smart and had an idea he wanted to live a long time.

THE devils were dancing in Gila's eyes. He baited Baldy the limit.

"Shucks, you done quit Hamsmith and gone on with those little spreads, huh? Maybe, Baldy, if I was to quit Hamsmith, you could get me a job with them. I don't like to be on a side against you. Not since that time you beat me with your gun. Maybe . . . That the fellow over there?"

Gila pointed to Chet. He pointed with his *left* hand.

"Yes!" Baldy gritted, and went for his gun. He was lightning fast, but Gila was greased lightning. He had made that move to get Baldy to draw. His gun was out and roared a split fraction of a second before the bald gunman's.

Baldy coughed. His gun dropped on the floor and he caught the edge of the bar. Wide-eyed, he looked toward Chet. Chet, who was to have fired on Gila from one side, making the job sure. Otherwise, Baldy would never have tried to out-gun Gila Gaines, bait or no bait. Dimly, dumbly, he realized Chet was grinning at him. Crossed up!

He gripped the bar harder and looked at Gila.

"Crouse—" the words pierced the buzzing, roaring sounds that were closing around Baldy—"Crouse, I told you maybe I was the best Tell the devil you guessed wrong—and I guessed right."

Baldy tried to answer, but could only cough his own blood. His knees buckled and his grip on the bar slackened.

"Uh," he sighed. He slipped down on his face. The fastest gunman of the small ranchers had been burned down.

Gila stooped, took a roll of bi... the dead man's pocket. He straightened, looked at Chet, then walked out and down the street.

"With int'rest!" Chet grunted. "Yeah."

"I GOT their best man and the whole damned thing's settled. Another thousand for the man; five thousand for the straightening up of your troubles on the range. Fork over the cash. I'm hitting the trail before this gets hot on my heels."

Hamsmith dry-washed his fat hands rapidly. Now, all he had to do was signal to the men who waited across the street. They'd get this gunman when he walked out—and Hamsmith would get his money back. Hamsmith started to hit an imaginary fly on the window with a folded newspaper—the signal. He stopped. First, he'd have information.

"Here's your thousand," he wheezed, counting out the money. "Which one was it you figured was—"

"That one called Kempie." Gila took the money and held out his hand for five thousand more. "Kempie, he was their best—until Baldy Crouse hired on with them. Then, Baldy was best. So—" Gila rolled a cigaret, grinning while Hamsmith fidgeted around—"I put Baldy away!"

"You did what!" Hamsmith roared. "Baldy is on our side."

"Was," corrected Gila as he blew a smoke ring. "But he hired out to the small fellers. Happens I know."

"Damn it, that don't settle those small outfits. They're still there," Hamsmith swore. "You got to—"

"Still there—' ...ri...ed—"and going to stay. Th... y you owe me five thousand. I've ... the question for you. You didn't say how I was to settle it; just said settle it."

"You dirty double-crosser!" Hamsmith was on his feet, leaning across his desk, his fat face puffed and livid. "You mean—"

"I mean, if you start this up again, you'll settle with me, you fat buzzard! Those small outfits stay. It's their water.

"If your range is no good without that water, let your range go to hell—or to the small ranchers. *Sabe?* Now pay me my five thousand."

"Sure." Hamsmith gritted the words. He reached into his desk drawer.

TWO shots sounded. One, the roar of a heavy, bone-handled .45. The other, the sharp "wump!" of a derringer that Hamsmith had jerked from the desk drawer. The .45 slug hit Hamsmith in the chest. The bullet from the derringer smashed into the ceiling.

"I'd figured that, too," Gila snapped, as Hamsmith sank down in his chair. "I figured that for the final settlement. You—"

Hamsmith slipped from his chair to the floor. He was beyond hearing. The men across the street waited for the signal. Gila Gaines came out, mounted and rode away. No signal came.

Riding toward Montana, Gila counted seven thousand in the roll of money he pulled from his chaps pocket.

"Pay, for bending my gun!" he grunted. "Yeah, paid in full." The wry smile creased his lips. "And I kept my word. Who says I didn't earn my pay?"

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HELL-[illegible]AT OF THE BITTER RIVER RANGE

By WALT COBURN

A DOZEN or more men crept through the night's shadows toward the small cabin where a light burned behind heavy burlap curtains. These men were all heavily armed. Their horses were hidden back in the brush down the creek, guarded by two men.

Closer and closer the circle of men

Jude Quillan ruled Apache Basin—master of a hundred grim-jawed gun-hawks! No living soul dared face his brute fury—except a slim, trigger-tempered girl—true she-whelp of her iron-fisted, lone-wolf sire!

drew in toward the cabin. Always they kept to the blackest shadows. Crouching by the stable or the horse corral, slipping across to the pile of cordwood stacked beside the shed near the house. Now, at a whistled signal that might have been the call of an owl, they closed in. A big, wide-shouldered man pounded heavily on the door.

"Come in," called a man's voice from the interior of the rough building.

The big man shoved open the door. There was a sawed-off shotgun in his hairy hands. He and the men with him had masks made of black cloth tied across their faces.

Inside was a single man. A cowboy in jumper and Levis. A red-haired, freckled, blunt-featured cowboy who grinned amiably as he raised his hands above his head. He wore no gun that was visible to the intruders.

A growled oath from the big leader of the night riders.

"What kind of a game yuh playin', anyhow?" he snarled through the black mask. "Where's Bob Harlan?"

"That," replied the red-haired cowboy

easily, "is jus o. e I don't know. I never heard uh an."

"Don't lie, red his ain't no Sunday-school picnic. want Bob Harlan. here is he?"

"If you was to pull the trigger on that scatter-gun, mister, I would still have to give yuh the same answer. I don't know no Bob Harlan and I don't know where he is."

"Then what are yuh doin' in his cabin?"

"Just washin' up the dishes I dirtied when I eat supper. I'm ridin' the grub line through this part uh the country and I stopped here tuh git the wrinkles outa my belly. There wasn't nobody home, so I put up my pony and pack mule and kinda made out to rustle me some supper. Up in my country that's kinda the custom."

"And just where is yore country, mister?"

"Montana, till I quit there. I aim to stay here somewheres in Arizona if I kin land a job with some spread."

"Montana, huh? That's Bob Harlan's old stompin' ground. Sounds almighty queer. Damned if I ain't got half a notion to gut shoot yuh where yuh stand."

"That," said the red-haired cowboy, "is plumb up to you, I reckon. I've done you no wrong but I ain't gonna stand here an' beg like a dog." A hard glint crept into the steel-gray eyes of the red-haired cowboy and his wide mouth tightened into a thin line. He faced the men without flinching.

AS the cabin filled with masked men there was the odor of whiskey. One of them who was a little unsteady on his feet laughed harshly.

"He's a game devil, Jude."

"Shut up," growled the big man. "Keep yore drunken gab shut." He stared hard at the red-haired cowboy. Above the black mask showed a pair of squinted, pale-gray eyes, one of which had a slight cast in it.

"What time did you ride here, red feller?" he growled.

"Just about dusk."

"Where from?"

"From across the Blue Mountains. Stayed at a horse camp there last night. The boys there told me I'd find work here in Apache Basin. They claimed the outfits was payin' top wages. So I come . My grub had run out and I stopped here. Now if yo're gonna kill me fer that, have at it. My arms is a-gittin' tired up there in the air. Holdin' yore arms up that-a-way is bad fer the circulation."

"So is a handful uh shotgun slugs." Without taking his eyes from the red-haired cowboy, he called orders to his men.

"I'm lettin' this cuss stay alive. He ain't harmed us. Start goin', boys. The night's gittin' on an' we got a few more calls tuh make."

The red-haired cowboy lowered his hands. The big man stepped closer, his bloodshot eyes slitted. His breath smelled strongly of corn likker. His voice was a snarling growl.

"Come mornin', you drag it fer another range. We ain't welcomin' no strangers in Apache Basin. Don't go doin' ary ridin' till sunrise er yuh might have hard luck. But come sunrise, you be on yore way."

The red-haired cowboy made no reply. The big man turned toward the door where a lanky man stood with a six-shooter in his hand.

"How about leavin' a man er two here tuh wait, case Bob Harlan shows up?" asked the lanky one. But the big man shook his head.

"Kain't be splittin' up the boys. May need every man afore mornin'. Harlan will keep. Let's git goin'."

The door banged after them. The red-haired cowboy picked up the dish towel he had been wielding when he was so rudely interrupted. There was a humorless grin on his wide mouth as he resumed his task.

"Nice little crowd uh boys," he mused. "Pleasant, just like a pack uh timber wolves. I smelled the stench uh somethin' bad when I rode down from that horse camp. Fellers I met sized me up like I was some breed uh skunk. Only pleasant gent I meet is that tow-headed cowboy on his way tuh town. I ask him where is the nearest ranch. He sends me here. Says I'm plumb welcome tuh what I kin find. I reckon that'd be Bob Harlan. Well, I like to found a bellyful uh buckshot. Yuh don't reckon now . . . Yuh don't reckon now that he knowed them jaspers was a-comin' to git him?"

II

SUNRISE found the red-haired cowboy loading his bed on his pack mule. He now wore a filled cartridge belt and a six-shooter and his carbine leaned against the corral. As he worked, his eyes kept watch in all directions.

The cabin was in a clearing on the bank of a running creek. Beyond were scrub junipers spotting low, rolling hills. There were patches of brush that might easily hide a man. The red-haired cowboy grinned crookedly and whistled tunelessly through his teeth. He watched the ears of his saddled horse, as he jerked the pack rope tight on the squaw hitch that held his tarp-covered bed.

Now the ears of his blue roan horse twitched forward. In a flash the red-haired cowboy was crouched in behind some cedar posts, his carbine ready. His eyes watched the direction indicated by the blue roan's ears.

Now a man on horseback came into view. A tall man on a bay horse. He rode at a brisk trot and there was a carbine across the saddle in front of him, ready for use. When he sighted the laden pack horse and the saddled blue roan, he called out:

"Hi, there, red-headed feller!"

"Hi there yoreself, tow-headed feller!"

"Nice mornin' after a dark night, ain't it?"

"It is," said the red-haired cowboy, rolling a cigaret. "It is, for a fact. It's kinda good tuh be alive an' kickin' on such a nice mornin'."

"You said a lot then. In any big rush?"

"Not exactly. Personal, I'd kinda like tuh linger around this Apache Basin range, but somethin' tells me I better be ridin' along."

"I thought," said the tow-haired cowpuncher, "that mebbyso you could lend me a hand for about ten minutes."

"Shore thing."

The tow-haired cowpuncher, without dismounting, led the way to the cabin. He dismounted stiffly and stood leaning against his horse, hands gripping the saddle horn. His face was gray with pain. The red-haired cowboy said:

"Hell, man, yo're hurt!"

"Bullet in my [illegible] ght mebbyso uh'd he'p me g[illegible]ng thing out."

"You bet I wi[illegible]"

INSIDE the cabin the red-haired cowboy played surgeon. Clean dish towe for bandages, corn whiskey for antiseptic, a pocket-knife for a probe. Crude surgery. The tow-head was game. When the job was finished and they had each taken a pull at the jug, the wounded man held out his hand.

"My name's Bob Harlan. I'm plumb grateful. Now you better be ridin' along because yuh might git into trouble. I got some enemies here in the Basin and if they thought you was my friend, or if they even ketched yuh here, they'd kill yuh. Better be ridin' on, cowhand."

"My name," said the red-haired waddie, grinning sideways, "is Jim Rust. Rusty for short. I met them enemies uh yourn last evenin'. They paid me a visit."

"Hell they did!"

"Yeah. And the big 'un called Jude gimme my travel orders. But you ain't in any shape tuh be left alone. And anyhow the more I bin ponderin' on how that Jude gent treated me, the more ringy I git. I reckon, if yuh don't mind, I'll stay a spell."

"Nope. You ride on, Rusty. No use draggin' you into this dirty mess. There's a war a-startin' here in Apache Basin. There was three men killed last night over on Cowhide. We give Jude Quillan and his gunmen a game. I was over on the Cowhide on a horse deal with the Ellison boys. About midnight we hear the dogs bark. When they rushed the house, we taken 'em on. Come daylight, they drifted and I started home. Some skunk taken a long shot at me as I rode along the trail. Hit me in the thigh. I'll be all right, pardner, in a day er so. You pull outa this while the goin' is good. There's gonna be war."

Rusty shook his head. "You ain't in any shape tuh be left alone. Yo're from Montana, so the Jude wolf said. Me, likewise. I worked for the Circle-C, the Bear Paw Pool, the Circle Diamond, Shonkin, and Square. Born at the foot uh the Little Rockies."

"I'm from the other side uh the old Missouri River," said Bob Harlan, his eyes

lighting up good tuh mee up with a cowb hat country. worked for the on the south side uh the river. S th the F outfit on un River and the staple outfit. Repped ith the Circle-C and the Square."

"And so wouldn't I be a fine son tuh lope off an' leave yuh in a tight? Ever meet the Harkers? They live somewhere in this part uh the country? Babe and Frank Harker?"

Bob Harlan gave Rusty a quick look. "Babe was killed here in the Apache Basin two months ago. Some uh Jude Quillan's skunks did the bushwhackin'. Frank was with us last night at the Ellison ranch. I'll tell a man I know 'em. The whole family. Dad Harker and his missus and Margaret. Finest folks in the Basin. Their place joins the Ellison's on the Rawhide. Margaret teaches school."

"Then I reckon I kin talk, Bob. Here's the reason for me bein' here." He handed Bob Harlan a frayed letter.

"From Margaret," said Bob, "tellin' about Babe bein' murdered."

"Me and Babe Harker was pardners since we was kids," explained Rusty. "He was younger than me but he always kinda follered me around and I thought a heap uh him. When my dad died and I was left an orphaned, wind-bellied kid, the Harkers taken me in an' raised me till I was old enough tuh rustle for myse'f. So when I git Margaret's letter, I quit my job as ramrod uh the Bear Paw Pool and I head for Apache Basin. I come here tuh do a little gun throwin' myself. So I'll just unsaddle and fetch my bed in here. And when this Jude Quillan layout show up again my guns will be where I kin git to 'em. I'm buyin' a few chips in this game."

III

"WHAT started this war here in Apache Basin?"

"Jude Quillan started it, Rusty. He wants the whole valley for his stinkin' sheep. Us cowmen here was in his way. None of us has any cattle to amount to anything. Just small cowmen. The Ellisons are the biggest spread. We run a pool wagon an' kinda look after one another's interests. Over on the rim there is more cowmen but they shore drag hun- They're a renegade pack that's uta Texas, the same as Jude Quillan. You musta come past some uh their ranches up on the rim uh the Blue Mountains. They got a horse camp there."

"I stopped there. I kinda sniffed somethin' wrong about that spread, though they treated me all right. They had a jug that had good likker which passed around frequent."

"There's a few good boys up there, for all they trail with a wolf pack. Boys that is on the dodge, mostly. I know two-three that has bin good friends to us boys. But Poe Parsons and that gang that trail with him is snakes. They whittle on our cattle a-plenty. In the cedar brakes it's hard to work the range clean uh mavericks. Poe and his boys rides good horses and they're all crack ropers. Poe is always in the first money at the rodeos. He mighta bin at the horse camp when you was there. Tall, black-headed dude with a little black mustache and eyes like an Apache. They claim he's quarter blood Apache. A good-lookin' rascal and a killer. Always dresses fancy."

"He was the gent that told me they was a-payin' fancy wages down here in the Basin. Does he trail with Jude Quillan's night riders?"

"Not him. I'll say this for Poe Parsons, he does his shootin' in the open and on the square. He's plumb fearless and quick as hell with a gun. And for all he's a rustler and handles wet cattle and horses, he'll sometimes ride down to my place or the Ellisons or Harkers or one uh the other ranches and do a man some kind of an unexpected favor. I've knowed him to pay off a man's note at the bank when the bank was goin' to foreclose. I've knowed him to ride forty miles tuh fetch a doctor when one uh the Ellison boys took sick with pneumonia. Once, when I busted a laig at the Prescott show, Poe sends two uh his men to take care uh my stock and he told 'em if they stole so much as one calf, he'd handle 'em plenty rough. That's Poe Parsons, the big boss of the wolves that live up on the rim."

"How does he stand with Jude Quillan?"

"Nobody kin give yuh the answer to that but Jude Quillan and Poe Parsons, and neither uh them is much of a hand to run off at the head."

It was getting dark now in th and Rusty had dressed the hole leg. The door was barred and a blanket hung across the window of the cabin. Bob's wound, while painful, was not serious. A hole in the thigh muscle. Rusty fed him whiskey to ease the pain.

They talked on until bedtime, then Rusty rolled his bed out on the floor and pulled off his boots.

BOTH men slept lightly. But Rusty was snoring gently when the nicker of a horse sounded out in the darkness. Rusty was out from under his blankets like a cat springing. His carbine was in his hand.

"Shhh! Quiet, Rusty." Bob Harlan sat up on his bunk, gun ready. There sounded the thud of horses' hoofs. Now a voice, hailing the cabin with bold tone.

"Hello there, in the cabin! Are you there, Bob Harlan?"

"Who's there?" called Bob gruffly. "What do you want?"

"It's Doc Newlon and a deputy sheriff. Heard you were hurt and came to patch you up."

"What in hell's the deputy for?"

"Protection, Bob. Let me in."

"Ride straight to the door," called Bob Harlan grimly, "and git off." He called to Rusty. "Light the lamp after they git inside."

Rusty, at a peephole beside the door, saw two men ride up. They dismounted. His six-shooter ready, Rusty let the two men in, barred the door, and stood to one side. In his sock feet he made no noise.

"The deputy," said Bob, "will light the lamp."

A match flared, revealing a short man with drooping sandy mustache. Under that mustache was a grin.

"Yo're gettin' almighty cautious, Bob," he said as he lit the lamp.

"Howdy, Dave. Didn't know it was you. Howdy, Doc. Danged white of you tuh come. Rusty, yuh needn't watch Dave, he's all right. When the time ever comes for Dave Jones to arrest me, he'll do it open, not by a trick."

"I hope, Bob, that day will never come. But things look snaky. I don't know how yuh got hurt. Don't give a damn, much. Only what does the other gent look like?"

"Never even ... uh hm, ve, but it was ...ve-six hundred yards from where ... up in the rim-rocks and I was mov... ...ng at a trot. A mighty hard target. Unless I'm a-guessin' all wrong, it was young Wes Quillan. He's the best shot in Apache Basin."

Dave Jones and the doctor exchanged a quick look. Then the doctor commenced his work.

"Whoever did this job of patching you up, Bob, is no slouch at first aid work. With what he had to work with, I couldn't have done better myself. Stay off this leg for a week and you'll be all right."

"I'll be here tuh take care uh him," said Rusty, and the way he said it brought a faint smile to the lips of Dave Jones, deputy sheriff.

"Say," asked Bob Harlan suddenly, "who told you I'd bin hurt? Nobody but the man that shot at me, and Rusty here knew about it. Who taken word to town to you, Doc?"

"That," said the grizzled country doctor, "is something I can't tell you, Bob. I was sworn to secrecy, after a fashion. It was about an hour before daylight when somebody rapped loudly at my door. I lit my light and answered the summons. Nobody there. Just a note written in a disguised hand. The note said you were wounded and needed me. But I was to burn the note and say nothing to anybody. But I fetched Dave along partly for company and partly to lend me a hand in case some gentleman tried to prevent my coming to your place."

"A note," mused Bob Harlan, frowning in a puzzled manner, "that's odd. Shore odd. . . . Dave, yuh understand I ain't preferrin' ary charges ag'in nobody on this. What happens in Apache Basin, us folks that live here has to settle amongst ourselves in our own way. The law stays outside the corral. We'll brand our own mavericks."

Dave Jones nodded, pulling at his sandy mustache. "I ain't at all anxious tuh mess into this war, Bob. But if I'm ordered to, I'll have to buy chips in the game. You know how I hate Jude Quillan. He's made the brag that he'll put his oldest boy, Zeb, in as sheriff next election. If Zeb gets in it will be Quillan law from Apache Basin to the far end of Mormon valley,

and from t[illegible]ter River. Th[illegible] town of Rim[illegible]ongер be fit f[illegible] decent women [illegible]st men. It'll be wide open and th[illegible]the limit. Whiskey nd bad women. Gamblin' and shootin'. 'll be Jude Quillan's town. He'll be king. Zeb and Luke and Wes, his three whelps, will carry out his orders. Ma Quillan and her daughter, Mona, will be wearin' diamonds and silk."

"Can't imagine Mona in anything but overalls and chaps and boots," put in the doctor. "Don't think I ever saw her in anything else." He chuckled as he taped the last bandage across Bob's wound.

"I'll never forget the day she slapped that drunken rowdy from the Rim that tried to kiss her there in front of the Lodge Saloon. She slapped him half a dozen times and every time she made contact you could hear the sound of it half a block away. Then she walked away as if nothing had happened, and Poe Parsons kicked that cowboy halfway across the street."

"Her and Poe make a shore handsome pair," said Bob. "I bet a hat she runs off some day and marries Poe Parsons."

"I'm no gambling man, Bob," said the doctor, "but I'll call that bet."

IV

BOB HARLAN'S leg healed rapidly. There had been no threats or night raids on the part of the Jude Quillan outfit. Bob was able to ride again and he had taken Rusty over his range. It was a cowman's paradise and the thought of it being sheeped out made Rusty's blood boil. Grass and water in abundance. At the edge of the basin were the juniper hills to shelter the stock from storms.

"Yonder," said Bob, pointing to the broken skyline that lay to the eastward, "is the Bitter River country and Mormon Valley. Mormon Valley got its name from the old Injun days when the Apaches was on the rampage. They wiped out a Mormon wagon train there on the banks of Bitter River. It's cow country now, same as this. The N-Bar is the biggest spread but they don't run much of a wagon. It's mostly small fellers like us that's in here now. It's as purty a range as this, almost. Then over west lays Rawhide Crick. The Rawhide is in under them two [illegible]nacles. The Harkers and Ellisons lives over on the Rawhide. I reckon, Rusty, that yo're right anxious to visit the Harkers."

"I'd kinda like to ride over there."

"I'm all right now. You kin pull out any time. After that lickin' we give that bunch uh skunks I don't think Jude will try anything for a while. Him and his boys is busy movin' some sheep into the mountains anyhow. They got no time tuh go gunnin' for folks. If yuh start now, you kin make the Harker place by dark. It lays in that notch between them twin buttes. They'll be shore proud to see yuh, pardner."

"Sure yo're all right, Bob?"

"Shore thing. I'd go along, only I got a few chores to tend to. See yuh when yuh git back, Rusty."

"I'll be back in a day or so, Bob. Solong. Take care uh yoreself."

Rusty rode away whistling. He was anxious to get to the Harker ranch. Anxious to meet his old friends. More than anxious to again see Margaret Harker. Margaret, brown eyed, brown haired, soft voiced, with her quiet little way of doing things for a man that most girls would never think about. A girl in a million, Margaret Harker. It was worth the long ride from Montana to Arizona to hear her voice. Rusty hummed a song and smiled at the blue sky. Love? Gosh, a drifting cowboy can't afford to git in love. Love was for them that had something to offer a woman. A cowboy took his lovin' out in campfire dreams. His home was where he spread his bed. But he'd be almighty glad to see Margaret.

RUSTY might not have given himself to his dreams had he known that, from a high butte, two men watched him with field glasses. They lowered their glasses and grinned at one another.

"It's the red headed cuss, Wes," said a short, blocky, unshaven man whose paunch lapped over the lacing of his bullhide chaps. "Reckon he's quittin' the country?"

"If he was," said the tall, slim waisted cowboy whose age could not be more than nineteen, "he'd have his pack mule. Where's yore brains, Ed? Yuh musta washed 'em away with that corn likker last evenin'. The

red topped gent is either goin' t... he's headed for the Ellison pla... byso the Harker ranch. Jude ...ne tol' him to quit the country and he ain't done it. I reckon we'll mosey on down an' 'tend to the sorrel headed jasper." His face was hostile.

"Yuh mind Jude's orders, Wes? He said no killin's."

"Who said anything about a killin', bonehead? There's other ways uh handlin' such fellers. Come on, yuh pot bellied specimen."

They mounted the horses they had hidden in the junipers and took a trail that would cut that of Rusty. Half an hour later that red headed cowboy was looking from under his hatbrim at the two men who leered at him.

"Wichaway, red top?" asked Wes Quillan, youngest of the Quillan tribe.

"Near as I kin make out," said Rusty calmly, his gray eyes watching the two, "the direction I'm head for is called West."

Wes Quillan's thin mouth writhed in a snarl. "That'll be all the comical cracks we want outa you, sorrel head. Yo're headed for Rawhide Crick and we know it."

"Then what was the idee in askin' a man somethin' yuh already knowed? Supposin' I am, slim feller, what of it?"

"You was told tuh quit this country. Why ain't yuh made tracks?"

"Well, young 'un, I kinda like the looks uh this range. You kin ride back and tell yore boss that I aim tuh stay here. I'm ridin' now to the Harker ranch. Babe Harker was a pardner uh mine. Some skunk killed him from the bush. I rode plumb down here from Montana to git the skunk that killed Babe Harker. Roll that up with yore next smoke, young 'un."

A gun suddenly showed in Rusty's hand. It seemed to cover both men. Rusty smiled and thumbed back the hammer. Wes Quillan and the stocky built man looked a little startled, and neither of them made a move to draw their guns.

Rusty grinned widely. "The other evenin' when you boys called my hand, you had all the aces. Now it's my turn tuh rake in the chips. If either of you would-be tough gents make one little move that I don't like, it'll be the last one yuh'll ever make on this earth. Fatty, it's shore a ...emptation to... ...a paunch uh ...ourn just to ... ...vi... whistle out. ...nd I'd like tuh ... ...could send a slug through that skin... ... without bustin' a bone. It's shore tem...in' targets. Dun... when I bin so tempted tuh pull a trigger.

"Besides, I don't like the color uh Fatty's shirt, and this slim kid is too mouthy. I hate mouthy kids. Gun packin' kids that tries tuh build a tough rep. Where I come from they quirt such ideas outa their bone heads. I wish one uh you two harmless things would make some kind of a break because I ain't tried out my gun for a couple uh weeks. I'll give you yore choice, gents. Either use them guns yuh pack, or throw 'em on the ground. I'm givin' yuh a fair chance. You may git me but I'm gittin' both uh you. Commence!"

"YOU got us covered," growled the fat one. "We ain't got a chance."

"You got as much chance as yore tribe give Babe Harker. Damn yuh, commence!"

Rusty's eyes were gray slits. His grin had twisted into a snarl. The gun in his hand seemed to spew flame.

"Yuh got us foul," said Wes Quillan, his face gray under its bronze. "We lay 'em down."

"Toss your guns on the ground, then, yuh two skunks. Make it quick."

Wes Quillan and the man called Ed dropped six-shooters and carbines on the ground.

"This means yore finish, red top," threatened Wes Quillan, his eyes red with hate. "Yuh can't pull a thing like this and win a thing. We'll git yuh."

"Yore squeaky voice grates on my nerves, young 'un. Shut up. Ride off and ride far. Go to Jude Quillan and tell him that there's one more cowboy that he's got to kill before he's the main boss uh Apache Basin. Tell the man that bushwhacked Babe Harker that a cowboy from Montana named Jim Rust, better known as Rusty, has rode plumb from Milk River to Apache Basin to kill him. Tell him that I'll meet him alone any place, any time, and at any kind of a game he wants to deal. Now hit a lope, you two mangy coyotes, and don't look back or yuh'll git a bullet between the eyes."

"We'll go," said Wes Quillan, white under the verbal lashing Rusty had meted

out to him, a[illegible] go I want yu' to know wh[illegible] name is W Quillan and I'm [illegible] kill yuh so[illegible] day."

"If ever you kil[illegible], you skinny coyote, it'll be from the brush. Hit the grit, you sheep stinkin' lice!"

Wes Quillan and his fat companion rode away at a lope. Rusty grinned mirthlessly as he heard them arguing, blaming one another, no doubt, for their humiliating misfortune. When they had gone a safe distance, Rusty quickly took their guns apart and shoved the various parts of gun mechanism in the sand. Then, whistling tunelessly through his teeth, he rode on toward the Harker ranch.

He had gone probably five miles and was fording a shallow creek crossing flanked by brush when a throaty, husky voice challenged him.

"Reach for the big blue sky, cowboy, and no foolin'!"

"Yore deal," said Rusty, his hands going skyward.

From the brush across the creek rode a tanned, black-haired girl in cowboy garb. In her hand was a .38 gun. Rusty looked into a pair of smoky gray eyes and grinned.

"I bet yo're Mona Quillan," he said.

"You win that bet, but you won't win any more. Come across the creek and get off that horse. Shed your gun. You won't be needin' it any more from now on."

V

STILL grinning, Rusty stepped off his horse and unbuckled his gun belt. Then, as if he were not under the cover of a gun, he fished tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigaret.

"Where's yore sheep hook, ma'am, and yore band?"

"You think that's a joke, I reckon, don't you?" she flared. She was a remarkably good looking girl. Dark, raven-haired, straight featured. Her smoky gray eyes at times seemed almost black. Perhaps a trace of Indian blood, for her cheekbones were high and she had that fiery, unconquerable nature that belongs to the Indian. Cherokee, Rusty guessed.

"I was just tryin' tuh make conversation. This is the first time I ever had a good lookin' girl throw down a gun on me. [illegible] are yuh stickin' me up, anyhow?"

[illegible] watching through my glasses when We[illegible]nd that fool Ed cut your trail. I saw what you did to 'em. I'm just payin' you off in your own kind of money."

"I coulda killed 'em both," said Rusty. "They begun it. I finished it. Yo're the first girl I ever saw that wore her hair cut off thataway and wore man's clothes and still looked like a million dollars."

"I'll get along without the compliments, cowboy. You can't softsoap your way out of this tight, so don't waste time tryin'."

"That wasn't my aim, lady. Just what are you a-goin' to do with me, anyhow?"

"Take you to our ranch. Dad will do the rest of it. It'll be plenty, don't worry."

"I hope he don't stake me to a band uh woolies to herd, that's all."

Mona Quillan almost smiled.

RUSTY went on amiably. "I rode herd on a band uh three thousand wethers once, up in Montana. The herder had froze tuh death in a blizzard, and the coyotes and wolves was bad. It was three days before the camp tender showed up and I never was gladder in my life tuh turn loose of anything. But I got tuh be right fond uh the two dogs that belonged to the dead herder. They was smarter than a heap uh humans I've knowed. They seemed tuh know I was plumb ignorant about sheep. Musta smelled the cow on me, I reckon. So they done most uh the work. Nights, when we drifted with the storm, I laid out. When the camp tender, a-follerin' my trail, ketched me, I'd drifted that band uh woolies within gunshot range uh the Circle-C bunkhouse. I was workin' for the Circle-C at the time.

"Come daylight, there I was. I figgered I'd sneak aroun' and come into the home ranch by another direction, but my luck turned sour. Yes, ma'am, luck was shore ag'in' me. Just as that fool camp tender comes a-drivin' up with his buckboard, here comes the Old Gent from the ranch, a-whippin' down the hind laig. I plays shep, an' like a lot uh them loco herders, I starts away from him. But here comes that fool camp tender and I'm ketched, yuh might say, between two fires. So I gives up the game an' pulls my head down low, turtle-like, into the collar uh my coonskin.

But the Old Gent knows the h[illegible] a-forkin'.

"'What in the name uh t'[illegible] and that and thus,' he bellers, 'are you a-doin' herdin' this bunch uh stinkin' sheep?'

"'I won 'em off Ole Nelson,' says I, 'in a stud game at Malta. I'm just driftin' 'em on to their winter range. How many sheep do yuh want tuh let me pass through the Circle-C ranch?"

"If the Old Gent had bin subject to apoplexy he'd uh died right now. As it is, he fires me then an' there. Then up comes the camp tender. He's a Swede that's only bin in Montana forty years and don't speak good English yet. He's all blowed up like a toad because he thinks I've stole the sheep. The Old Gent, recollectin' a few uh the times I bin in jail fer this an' that, figgers I got drunk an' stole the sheep. The only friends I got is them two dogs.

"'Git off that Circle-C hoss,' says the Old Gent, 'and walk to the bunk-house. No red-headed idiot is gonna git away with a job like this.'

"Which I does. But my feet don't track and I falls down. They're some froze up to my knees. Then things kinda commence goin' around in black circles and I wake up in the bunk-house with the cook and the Old Gent and Ole Nelson hisse'f a-workin' on me. Nelson, who owns the woolies, has found the dead herder where I put him in his sheep wagon, and he finds the note I leave.

"Ole Nelson, fer all he's a Swede sheepman, is a square feller. He gimme a check for a thousand dollars then an' there, and the Old Gent produces a quart uh his private stock and hires me back with a ten-dollar raise.

"But I had tuh quit there. Yes, ma'am, had tuh pull out. Them knot-headed cowhands jest hoorawed me until . . . Sorry, ma'am, but I need that cannon!"

WITH a swift leap, Rusty had grabbed Mona's wrist and flipped the gun from her hand. He picked it up off the ground and recovered his own gun. Mona sat her horse, breathing hard, her eyes smoldering, her red lips twitching.

"Sorry, ma'am. First time I ever mistreated a lady. But I just couldn't stand the smell uh that sheep ranch you wanted me tuh visit."

Suddenly M[illegible] purred [illegible] horse forward [illegible] hong around [illegible] gloved wr[illegible] heavy rawhide quirt. Before Ru[illegible] sed her intention, the wicked quirt w[illegible] pping at his fac[illegible] He threw an arm up to protect himse[illegible] The girl was like an infuriated wildcat. Again and again the quirt lashed the man. Her horse reared and shied but she handled the animal with the skill of a bronc rider. Crowding the horse against the man, slashing with the quirt that hissed like a snake. Her eyes blazing, red lips curled back from white teeth.

Now Rusty caught the twin tails of the rawhide quirt. With a quick jerk he pulled her off balance, out of the saddle. Now he held her in his arms. Arms that had the grip of steel bands. Mona was fighting like a tigress, but she was no match for this red-haired cowboy who was made of rawhide and barb wire.

Through a smear of trickling blood that came from the slashes of Mona Quillan's quirt, Rusty grinned at the infuriated girl. Gradually her struggles lessened. Suddenly Rusty kissed her on the mouth, then let her go.

"That," he told her, wiping the blood from his face, "pays for the quirtin'."

Rusty's blood was on the girl's lips. She stood there, swaying a little, panting like a spent runner, staring at the man's lacerated face. The anger was gone from her eyes as she stared, fascinated, at the bloody face of the grinning cowboy.

Now the grin on Rusty's bloody mouth became rigid. His nostrils had caught the odor of smoke. Cigaret smoke. Mexican cigaret smoke. He whirled, gun in hand, ready for fight.

On the other side of the little creek stood a tall, dark man in garb that was a bit fancy for the common cowboy. A white Stetson, gray flannel shirt, leather jumper, California pants tucked into fancy boots. Silver spurs and a sagging cartridge belt that was weighted down by an ivory-handled gun.

The man was handsome, with a slim black mustache and black hair. His eyes were black, opaque, unfathomable. A Mexican cigaret of the finest brand hung from his well-shaped mouth.

This was Poe Parsons, chief of the lawless men who rode the rim of Apache

[illegible] Po[illegible] a [illegible]most dangerou[illegible] [illegible]mpse of blue sky through black man of ther[illegible] [illegible]'s gun swu[illegible] to cover him, Pc[illegible] raised his han[illegible]s in the air. Wh[illegible] flashed in what might have been a [illegible]e.

"Put up your gun, my red-headed friend. You and I have no quarrel."

RUSTY shoved his gun back in its holster. Poe Parsons lifted his white hat in salute to the girl.

"For once, Mona," he said, "you met a man who gave you spade for spade, no?" He stepped back in the brush, reappearing in a moment on the back of the most perfect mahogany bay horse that Rusty had ever seen. He rode across the creek and dismounted, facing Rusty and the girl.

Mona glared at him from under long black lashes. Rusty dabbed at his ripped face. They were both confused, ill at ease, from the knowledge that Poe Parsons had witnessed their battle.

"I ride here," said Poe Parsons smoothly, "to keep an appointment with a lady. I find her quirting a man, riding him down. Then the tables turn and it is the man's turn. My red-haired friend, it is not easy for a man like me to see the woman I love in the arms of another man. I saw what you call red during those minutes when she fought in your embrace. And when you kissed her, you do not know how near you were to death.

"Then you let her free and you said what you said to her. And in that moment I knew that you were a man and that the kiss meant nothing. Many men would have exacted a higher price for such a lashing. Had you been such a man, one of us would now be dead. Because no man can take what belongs to Poe Parsons and keep on living."

"Since when have I belonged to you?" flared Mona.

"Since the first moment I saw you. When the time comes, I'll take you. But this is not the time nor the place for such talk. Just what started this battle?"

"The lady," said Rusty, "was aimin' to herd me over to the Quillan ranch an' turn me over to Jude Quillan. I don't like the smell uh wool so I argued the question. While I think of it, here's yore gun, ma'am, and yore quirt."

Mona Quillan smiled suddenly. It was

"Thank[illegible]or the gun. You can keep the quirt as a souvenir."

She held out her hand. "We'll shake and call it square. I'm sorry I spoiled your face."

"Don't let that keep you awake of a night," said Rusty. "There wasn't much there tuh spoil. Now I'd better be ridin' along my trail. Got some miles tuh cover before dark."

"Which way are you heading?" asked Poe Parsons. "If that's not too personal a question."

"The Harker place on the Rawhide."

"Would my company be unwelcome?"

"No, sir, I'd be right glad to have yuh along."

"I'll catch up with you in half an hour or so, then."

Rusty mounted his big blue roan and rode on along the trail. His last impression of the girl and man behind him was that they were eyeing one another more like enemies than lovers.

RUSTY'S face smarted and he wondered just what sort of a cock and bull story he could tell the Harkers when they asked him about his disfigured face. The humor of it struck him and he chuckled to himself. He was still grinning when, half an hour later, Poe caught up with him.

"Something amusing, friend?"

"I was just thinkin' how I'd explain away this face uh mine. I bet I look like I'd matched a fight with a cougar."

"Which," said Poe without smiling, "you most certainly did." Then he smiled and passed a leather case filled with Mexican cigarets.

"I'll roll one, thanks. Them gold-tipped smokes is too rich for a common cowhand's blood."

"I would not say, my friend, that you are a common cowhand. It is partly because I know that you are not, that I ride with you. I have a proposition to make you as we ride. That, as I say, is one reason I ride with you. There is a second reason that is, perhaps, more vital to you. I happen to know that should you ride alone toward the Harker ranch, you would never reach there alive."

Poe Parsons produced a leathe[r] flask.

"Few men have ever share[d] [h]is fla[sk] with me. Will you join me in a drink?"

"I will, and with pleasure."

This little act of comradeship accomplished, they rode on for perhaps a mile in silence. It was Poe Parsons who broke the silence.

"I need a man. A man I can put faith in. A man of courage and honor, even though it be the courage of an outlaw and honor between thieves. When you stayed at my camp, I looked you over very carefully. When you left there, you were watched. In the crowd of masked men who paid you a visit that night at Bob Harlan's cabin, was one of my spies. He gave me an account of what happened. I know that, in spite of the warning given you, you remained there to aid a friend.

"Today Wes Quillan and the paunchy Ed tried to stop you and they came out second best. Wes is rated as a bad man with a gun, a killer. So is Ed. Lastly, there was that little incident at the creek proving that you have a respect for womanhood. A man of such qualities is the man I need badly. There is not one of my men whom I can really trust. More than a few of them would, if given the chance, shoot me in the back. If you will join me, Jim Rust, I will pay you ten times the money you can make here in the Basin. I'm not asking for an answer now. I want you to think it over from every angle. When you arrive at a decision, one way or another, let me know. In either case you may count me your friend because of what happened there at the creek. When Poe Parsons gives his friendship, it stays given. I am not an Injun giver, even though there is Injun blood in my veins."

He held out his hand and Rusty gripped it. The red-haired cowboy was greatly impressed by the sincerity of this man. He had never met a man quite like Poe Parsons. A man of education and polish. A killer. A lover of one woman. A self-admitted outlaw and rustler. Rusty could imagine Poe killing without a qualm of conscience. Yet Bob Harlan had pictured the outlaw's other side. A softer, more human side.

To trail with Poe Parsons meant wealth and adventure. Pasears into Old Mexico [a] raiding parti[es] [w]th th[e] d the lawle[ss] [f]ights with a s[w]ift horse bet[we]s. The flash of gunfire in the dar[k] [t]he rush of wind in a man's face. [B]d spilled on the moonlit sand. Fighting, hiding, returning to balance the accounts. Campfires where bearded men sat swapping yarns about strange places and daring deeds. Living always in danger, intoxicated, drunk with the thrill of it all. Gold in a man's pockets. Gold to be thrown away in a single night in some Mexican town where there was music and dancing and the stinging warmth of tequila in a man's belly. Living each day as if it were a man's last day on earth. Staking his life against odds.

That would be the life a man would live if he rode with Poe Parsons. A short, swift-moving life. A quick end. An unmarked grave.

Something like electricity tingled Rusty's nerves, quickening his pulse. Like many another cowboy, he felt always that call to break loose from the workaday life. To ride under the rim of the skyline with a good horse under him and a gun in his hand.

Not that the cowboy wants to be criminal. It is the adventure, the excitement, the thrill of it. Like a game of win or lose all. The hardships thrown in as a handicap. Fighting always against odds. Forgetting that death always wins in the end. Well, death comes to every man, be he honest or a thief. Of what value is a prosaic, humdrum life to a man in whose veins runs the blood of the adventurer? Men die of such ailments as smallpox and pneumonia. But an outlaw dies by a bullet or at the end of a rope.

"I'll be a-ponderin' on it plenty," said Rusty after a long silence. "But before I do anything about it, I got a chore to tend to. I come here tuh kill the skunk that bushwhacked Babe Harker."

VI

THREE times on the trail, at points ideal for an ambush, Rusty and Poe Parsons met men. Roughly garbed, bearded, armed men, whose hands left their gun butts at the recognition of the outlaw chief. And while there was no sign of animosity, still Rusty sensed a sul-

[illegible]sent[illegible] [illegible]hey let the tw[illegible]
men ride o[illegible] [illegible]inly.

"They r[illegible] [illegible]veling with a stranger. But t[illegible] one damn thing they can do abou[illegible] We're as welcome as sand-burrs in a man's blankets."

"Who are they?" asked Rusty.

"Jude's imported gunmen. A lousy-looking lot, no? He gathered 'em down along the border towns. Saloon bums, a lot of 'em, gutless in a real fight but dangerous enough when they're well sheltered behind some brush or rocks. He just put them in here last night and they were given orders to stop anybody that traveled along the trail and take them in to his home ranch. I got word that he'd imported some fighting men and that's one reason I came down from the rim. I wanted to see for myself what sort of a gang they were. So far, there's been one in each bunch that knows they can't win anything by trying to stop me. But in case we get halted by some of 'em that don't know me, it will mean a scrap. That's why I've taken the lead and told you to follow me."

"I'd sooner take equal chances, if it's the same tuh you," said Rusty. "Yuh make me feel kinda harmless."

"You needn't feel that way, Rusty. But if you do, we'll ride side by side through the bad spots. However, I don't look for trouble. They've got their orders regarding me, and a description of me that they can't miss. If any of 'em do open upon us, it will be some personal enemy of mine. It's happened like that before. And while I never had proof, still I'd bet all I have that Jude put them in on purpose to get me. Jude is handy at that sort of stuff. He'd give a lot to see me laid out with my hands folded across my chest. In fact, the rustling of the leaves in the trees has told me that he's put a secret price on my head."

"Why?"

"For two reasons, perhaps more, First, as Bob Harlan has no doubt told you, Jude Quillan wants control of all this country so he can put in sheep. He's afraid of my power up on the rim. Up there, so long as I live, he can never get a toe-hold. But with me dead, my men would scatter like coyotes and he could move up on some good winter range. [illegible]e reason he'd pay a fancy price [illegible]n who snuffed out my candle."

Poe [illegible]ons lit another Mexican cigaret and sm[illegible]ed half of it before he broke the silence that Rusty knew better than to disturb.

"The second reason is his daughter Mona. Jude is ambitious and, in his own peculiar way, proud as Lucifer. He does not want his daughter married to an outlaw. He wants her to get a real education and marry some prominent citizen. He gets a case of cramps every time he sees Mona with me. But there isn't one damn' thing he can do about it except kill me off. He don't dare tell me I can't see her. For many reasons he has to swallow that bitter medicine. It gripes him something terrible. . . .

"I don't exactly know why I'm telling you this, my friend. I've never unloaded it on anyone before. But somehow I trust you and I know that what I'm saying goes no farther. I hope you can see your way to join me. I need a man like you mighty bad and I'll pay for your services. It's not your guns so much that I'm needing, but rather the comradeship of a real man. A man I can trust with my secrets. With my money. My life. And with the only woman on earth I ever loved. I'll be waiting impatiently, Rusty, for your decision."

"If I'm lucky enough to locate the dirty snake that killed Babe Harker, and I kill him like I'd kill a rattler, then I'll have to quit the Basin, I reckon," Rusty mused aloud. "In which case I'd be plumb glad to throw in with yuh."

"That's true." Poe Parsons' black eyes narrowed ever so slightly. His straight black brows were knitted in a thoughtful scowl.

"Yes. If you kill the man that killed Babe Harker, you'll sure have to quit Apache Basin. They'd get you in twelve hours." Poe Parsons also seemed to be musing aloud. He seemed to be thinking out some grave question.

A LONG silence now held the two men as they rode, side by side, into the heart of a blood-red sunset that bathed the basin and the surrounding hills in a soft glow.

"I'm an old-time friend uh the Harkers," said Rusty. "I'll be takin' their

side in any war that comes up h think a heap uh the Harkers. I I'd hang and rattle with them. e, win lose or draw. I'm bound tuh o that."

"They won't have a chance against Jude Quillan, Rusty, once he opens up in dead earnest. Up till now he's been bluffing, but the man's a little insane on the subject of power. He's going through this valley like a scourge. The Harkers and Ellisons and Bob Harlan won't have a chance against him. You'd be throwing your life away for a lost cause."

"I can't make out tuh do otherwise, Poe. They're like my own kin-folks to me. And better men than me has died for a lost cause."

"Well spoken, pardner. That rather complicates things for you and me, though."

"Meanin' yo're sidin' in with Jude Quillan's outfit?" asked Rusty quickly.

"You haven't joined me yet, Rusty," smiled Poe Parsons. "My plans are mine and mine only. My own men don't know where I stand. No man on earth knows."

"Excuse me," grinned Rusty. "I wasn't aimin' to be pryin' in. Just thought we might git the situation cleared up."

Again Poe Parsons smiled, but his eyes were fathomless as ever. Rusty wondered just how deep that smile of Poe's ever went.

"Margaret Harker," said Poe, his smile widening, "is a mighty fine girl. One of God's finest. I don't blame you, old-timer."

Rusty felt his face grow suddenly hot. Poe laughed. Rusty grinned foolishly and fumbled with paper and tobacco.

"Shucks, Poe, Margaret ain't for me. What has a fool puncher like me to offer a woman? She deserves a better life than these ranch women have. Washin' and scrubbin' and cookin' and bein' alone two-thirds uh the time. No decent clothes like women want. No fun and all work. It's a hell of a life for a woman. I want her tuh quit this ranchin' and live in town. She's got a good education. She could marry some man that would give her all the things she deserves. I won't deny I think more uh her than anybody in the world. But I think too much uh her to prison her on a two-by-twice ranch with a no-account cowpuncher."

"A man like w u like ty. You're gent. Me, I'm altogether o ove a woman and she loves share the good and the bad. I'll ex er to go with me to the heights and sometimes into t depths. Take equal chances. Share champagne of life and the dregs of life. Mona will do that. She is the only woman I have ever found who could be my mate. You, you're different. Honest thinking, straightforward, giving all and asking nothing. You think your case is hopeless. I disagree. I am going to do some thinking along those lines, Rusty. I want you to help me. I'll see you don't lose. We'll see what we can do about it."

Again the silence held them as they jogged along a wagon road. Dusk had crept into the Basin and the last song of the meadowlark died in the twilight.

"Rusty?"

"Yeah?"

"If you killed the man who murdered Babe Harker, you'd be forced to join me, for a while, anyhow."

"I reckon so, Poe."

"And perhaps, if you joined me, I could help you work out your problem with Margaret Harker. I think I could. Follow me, Rusty?"

"I'm tryin' to, Poe."

"I won't promise anything, Rusty. But it may be that you will learn, by the rustling of the leaves, who killed Babe Harker!"

VII

WHEN they came to the Harker boundary, Poe Parsons pulled up. In the distance, between the two peaks that notched the starlit sky, showed a pin-point of light that was the Harker ranch. For while the Harkers, like all the other ranchers in Apache Basin, lived behind drawn blinds, it was an old custom of Ma Harker's to keep a light burning in a spare room until bedtime, to guide friends to their place. It might be said that this homely gesture rather typified that woman whose life had been spent on cow ranches.

"I'll be leaving you here, Rusty."

"I thought you were coming on to the ranch, Poe?"

"Not tonight. It is necessary that I be

Awhi li ing. Give r
kindest re d arkers. G
luck, Rusty gs over. D 't
ride alone at n gios."

Poe Parsons r away into the shadows of the night, and Rusty went on alone. He was within half a mile of the ranch house when a voice challenged him.

"Hold up! Who are yuh?"

There was a gun in Rusty's hand, hidden by the pommel of his saddle. But he hesitated to use it. It might be a Harker cowboy who was challenging him. On the other hand, it might be one of Jude Quillan's killers who was halting him.

"I'm a friend uh the Harker family," he gave reply.

"Yeah? Mebbyso. Mebby not. Who's with yuh?"

"I'm alone."

"Who sent yuh?"

"Nobody ever sends me anywhere, mister. I'm free, white, and of age. My hair is red and my face is speckled. I come from Montana, where the snow stays on the mountain tops and the grass grows belly deep in the coulees. I'm peaceable by nature but I'm surely aimin' to visit my friends the Harkers and there's a gun in my hand that'll clear my trail. So gimme room!"

He tickled the blue roan with the spurs. Lying flat along the neck of his horse, he raced along the road. His gun was ready to belch fire at any man who shot at him. The blue roan, despite the long day's journey, was covering the ground with the speed of a racehorse.

But no shots broke the silence of the night. Rusty pulled up at the ranch house and stepped up on the veranda. He rapped at the barred door. A code rap. One, three, one. He heard someone moving inside. Then a man's deep voice:

"Who's there?"

"A red-headed jasper from the Little Rockies. The kid that used to ride the milk-pen calves."

The door swung open. Dad Harker, tall, grizzled, rawboned, in his shirt-sleeves and sock feet, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, stood there. Then he leaned the shotgun against the wall and gripped Rusty's hand. The old cowman's voice shook as he greeted Rusty. His keen blue eyes were misty.

Maggie! C'mere! Look what 's fetched in!"

THERE followed a welcome that brought a lump to the cowboy's throat. Ma Harker wept as she held the husky cowboy in her ample arms. Then Margaret kissed him and hugged him and wept a little. Dad Harker brought out a jug and glasses.

"Let the boy git his breath, dang it," he told the women. "He's redder'n a Sioux blanket. Shucks, a man don't like bein' pawed by a pack uh females."

"How about it, Rusty?" laughed Margaret. For the first time she noticed his lacerated face. "Goodness, Rusty, what's happened to your face?"

Rusty grinned uneasily. "I reckon I ain't got used tuh dodgin' these mesquite limbs," he evaded.

Now came a lusty pounding at the door.

"That'll be Frank," said Dad Harker. "How'd yuh ever git past him without bein' stopped, Rusty?"

Now Frank Harker came in. A tall, rangy, long-muscled cowboy with the blue eyes of his father and rugged features. With a wild yelp he rushed at Rusty and for ten minutes the two wrestled and pummeled one another. Till finally Rusty pinioned Frank's arms and sat on his heaving chest.

"Got enough?" he panted. "Holler Injun, yuh son of a gun!"

"I got enough fer one dose, yuh sorrel-topped, speckle-faced sheep thief."

"He like tuh rode me down, Dad," grinned Frank, when the three glasses were filled. "He shore was hell bent tuh git here."

"Welcome home, son." Dad Harker lifted his glass. They drank in silence.

Ma Harker was busy getting supper for the red-haired cowboy. Margaret was setting the table. The three men talked. Frank and Rusty had put up their horses. The door was barred, the blinds drawn low.

Underneath their bantering talk, their exchange of news, ran that undercurrent of lurking danger. Against the walls leaned rifles and shotguns. None of the three men had removed their guns. The two women moved about the house with a

sort of cautious tread and se[illegible] to be listening for some or[illegible] Now and then Rusty's gla[illegible] fasten[illegible] on the tinted photograph of [illegible]abe Harker in its gilt frame above the old oak sideboard. Babe, youngest of the Harkers. Babe, who had loved life so well.

There, in its black case, was Babe's fiddle. He'd loved music and dancing and laughter. He was always laughing or cracking jokes or singing songs or playing his beloved fiddle. Now Babe was dead. Murdered. And while no one of them mentioned him that evening, still they all felt that emptiness that his death had left.

Once Rusty saw Margaret wiping away the tears from her eyes. After the women had retired the three men drew their chairs closer about the stove. Dad Harker filled their glasses. And in low tones they talked of those things which were not for the ears of Ma Harker and Margaret.

"I reckon," said Rusty, "that I'm on the track uh the snake that got Babe."

"When yuh git his name, Rusty," said Frank grimly, and his blue eyes were like cold ice, "pass it on to me. It's my job."

Rusty shook his head. "I rode down here from Montana tuh handle the job, Frank."

There was a certain finality to Rusty's tone that silenced Frank and his father. They knew how Babe had always been closer to Rusty than to his own brother. How, from childhood, he had worshiped Rusty. How he had tried to walk and talk like the red-haired cowboy. Rusty had been Babe's god, his idol, his great hero. And Rusty had loved the curly-haired youngster like a brother. Yes, it was Rusty's job.

The three men drank in silence. Rusty told about staying with Bob Harlan. He mentioned meeting Poe Parsons. But he made no mention of Poe's proposition to join his outfit up on the rim.

VIII

JUDE QUILLAN dreamed of an empire. Even as other men, some good, some bad, had dreamed.

Ruthless, merciless, sparing no one, he made his plans even as those other men made theirs. Now he sat in his private office at his [illegible]sy [illegible]ncil and pape[illegible] H[illegible]new [illegible] section corne[illegible] of land, every spring and ta[illegible]terhole in the country. To own [illegible]at domain, to pu[illegible] sheep there and h[illegible]dle them as Jud[illegible] lan well knew how to handle them, make him the sheep king of Arizona. He would build up a vast fortune. He would become a power. He would mix in politics, have the country renamed after him. Quillan County. . . . Quillan County, Arizona. . . . Senator Quillan from Quillan County. . . .

The cabin that was his private office reeked with the odor of strong tobacco. Now and then he took a pull at his jug of corn likker. No man had ever seen Jude Quillan drunk. Yet he could empty a jug between dawn and bedtime.

In the gun rack beside his desk was an array of weapons that was a small arsenal. There were hidden portholes in the log walls. Under the plank floor was a month's supply of grub. Also there was a well of good water underneath the log building. A man could stand off a regiment of soldiers there, and it would take a month to starve him out. Jude moved slowly, carefully, making his plans fool-proof.

Now, as he sat in his log cabin dreaming and planning and plotting how he would rid the country of his enemies, he conjured up great scenes. Before him lay but a few puny obstacles that he would brush aside when the time came. On his littered desk was a list of names. Names of men who must be either driven out of Apache Basin or killed. To that list he now added a new name—Jim Rust.

Now, a twisted grin on his thin-lipped mouth, he slowly wrote another name. Poe Parsons. For many minutes he studied that name, his mismated eyes glittering wickedly. Then he carefully erased the name. Not that he was eliminating Poe Parsons from the list. But it would never do to let Poe know that there was a price on his head. Cunning as was Jude Quillan, he was not clever enough to guess that Poe knew of that bounty on his handsome head.

A rapping at the heavy door. Mona's voice.

"How about letting a lady enter the lion's den?"

[illegible]ished. Above all [illegible] on [illegible]ream of power, he love[illegible]one, of all the Quillans, was a [illegible] pass through [illegible] door that led to [illegible] sanctuary. He [illegible] the bar on the [illegible]or and let her in.

MONA blinked a little in the lamplight, for she had come in from the darkness. He barred the door and she dropped into a chair. Booted, spurred, in overalls and flannel shirt, she was like some dark, slim, handsome boy. She tossed her Stetson on the desk and rolled a cigaret.

"Yuh hadn't orter be smokin' them things," Jude said with a half-hearted effort at gruffness. "It ain't ladylike."

"I don't want to be ladylike. If I was one of these cake-nibbling, tea-sipping, lisping females, I suppose you'd be proud of me? Is Wes home?"

"Ain't seen him. Him and Ed was supposed tuh . . ."

"Supposed to beat up that red-headed cowboy that's been staying at Bob Harlan's," finished Mona, blowing a smoke ring and poking a slender tanned finger through it. "But they missed fire."

"How's that, again? Missed fire?"

"The red-headed cowboy took away their guns and sent 'em on their way. Lucky he didn't kill 'em both. He had plenty chances. Wes is too mouthy, for one thing, and when he's half drunk, which he always is, he can't get to his gun as fast as an eighty-year-old paralytic. And Ed is worse than harmless. They make a great pair. If I had my say, I'd give 'em each a band of woolies. That's their speed. And another thing, that red-headed cowboy is bad medicine. He does a lot of grinning and joshing, but he's dangerous."

"Where'd he go after he trimmed Wes and Ed?" Jude was scowling blackly now.

"To the Harker ranch."

Jude grinned crookedly. "Then the other boys along the trail will fetch him in."

"I think not. Poe was riding with him."

Jude was on his feet with a jerk, his fists clenched, his eyes narrowed. "Poe? Poe Parsons?"

"Yep. Poe Parsons. Personal escort [illegible]ty cowboy. Try to get a laugh [illegible]me."

"What th[illegible]ell's Poe got, mixin' into my business [illegible]taway? I knowed that red-headed cuss 'ud be travelin' over to the Harker place. I wanted him stopped. Now that damned dude steps in. He'll move in once too often some day and never live tuh tell about it. What's his idee, anyhow?"

"Poe didn't say. As you know by now, Poe Parsons is not what you might call gabby. And he don't trust me too far, anyhow. He told me so today. Sometimes I could kill that devil!"

"Hmmmm. Yet yuh ride twenty miles tuh meet him. I don't like the way yuh go traipsin' all over the country with that danged cow thief Some day yo're gonna be almighty sorry."

"We've talked that out before, Dad. I'll meet Poe when and where I like. I'm as safe up on the rim at his camp as I'd be in church. He's too devilish proud to take advantage of me until I'm willing to marry him. And he knows that if that time ever comes, I'll let him know. Poe may be a cow thief but he's never shot a man from the brush and he's never been caught telling a lie to any man, friend or enemy. Some time, some place Poe Parsons has been a gentleman. His early training still keeps him inside his own certain code. I'd trust Poe a heap farther than I'd ever trust my own drunken brothers."

"HE'S a cow thief," growled Jude. "He don't deny it. But he's not a bushwhacker. See what I mean?" Mona's smoky eyes were ablaze. Jude flinched under her steady gaze. He tilted his jug and let the hot corn whiskey trickle down his leathery throat.

"Whatever does he mean, sidin' in with them cow folks? If he's so danged straight an' upright, why's he sneakin' around he'p-in' that red-headed cowpuncher git to the Harker place?"

"I wouldn't call it sneaking, Dad. Poe does what he wants to do and he does it in the open. He . . . He must have taken a liking to the Rusty gent. It wouldn't surprise me if Poe wanted Rusty to join his outfit up on the rim."

Jude spat out an oath. "Wouldn't that

be sweet! A danged spy up th... by hiring othe... do th... m... I rim!"

"told myse... d ... t th... ere

"That would be Poe's con... n, not c...s. ...vious of ... was not easy You don't own the rim any ...ore than you to put aside s... e things that have can own Poe Parsons."

been said of Ju... ian. But I remem-

"I'll own it some day." Jude pounded bered the days b... e we had so the desk with his hairy fist. land and so many sheep. When w... poor and I was a kid in pig tails. ...hen

"Not while Poe Parsons is alive, you you'd take me on long rides across the won't." country and we'd camp out at night under

"Poe Parsons can't live forever." the stars. You never licked me, never

"He'll live longer than the men you hire scolded me. You were always bringing me to kill him." home something from town. My first pair

Jude drew back as if struck in the of boots. A stamped saddle. A pair of face. "Who told you I hired anybody to chaps. A spotted pony. And I've gone to kill him?" sleep many a night when you sat by the

Mona Quillan shrugged and smiled, but camp-fire and held me in your arms. . . . her eyes did not smile as she stared steadily at her father.

"Those things I can never forget. That's why it is going to be hard to leave you and strike out for myself."

"You can be sure that it wasn't Poe who told me, though I'd bet my best horse he knows. Trouble is with you, Jude Quillan, you trust the wrong men. Men that talk a little too loose when their hide is soaked with corn whiskey. That talk spreads. The leaves rustle. I've known for a long time that there was a ten-thousand-dollar bounty on the head of Poe Parsons. You can't look at me straight and deny it."

"Leave me?" said Jude huskily. "Leave yore ol' daddy, Mona?"

"Yes. Unless you take that bounty off Poe's head, I'm leaving. I'm going to Poe and marry him and follow wherever he goes."

Jude sat slumped in his old armchair. His rawboned shoulders sagged. He seemed almost old and a little beaten. Mona sat cross-legged, spinning the rowel of one of her spurs with the thumb. The fire died out of her smoky eyes as she studied her father.

"I'd kill the skunk that told yuh that," he muttered.

"No. No, I don't think you would. But that isn't just what I wanted to tell you, Dad. It's time you and I had a showdown. I've been mighty loyal to you, even when I knew that you were dead wrong. I've defended you a good many times. I've tried to make myself think that you were something big and great and powerful. And God knows it's been hard to convince myself, sometimes, that you weren't what men say you are. I've taken a man's place on this ranch. I've stayed with you when your sons failed you. I've sat, night after night, here in this cabin, and listened to you voice your dreams and hopes and plans.

"When men said of you that you were a murderer, not by actual deed but

JUDE had crumpled like a man shot. His chin sagging on his chest, he sat there in his old armchair. Mona watched him, a stricken, desperate look in her eyes. Defiance and pity mingled there in her glance. She was, perhaps, the only person alive who really loved this grizzled man who dreamed of an empire. Upon her he had spent all his love, if his queer affection could be so called. And now she was deserting him.

It seemed hours before he looked up. His eyes were glazed with pain.

"I had other plans for yuh, Mona. I wanted to see yuh take yore proper place in Arizona. I'd figgered on yuh marryin' a real man that could give yuh a fine home and purty clothes and take yuh on trips tuh places I'll never see. More than anything else, I wanted yuh to be happy and git outa life what belongs to yuh.

"If yuh run off with Poe Parsons, yore life would be a coyote life. Runnin' an' dodgin'. Fearin' the law, always, till yuh die. Hidin' like a wild animal bein' hunted by houn's. Gittin' hungry an' cold an' wet an' laig weary. Gawd knows, Mona, that kinda life is tough enough for the toughest kind of a man. For a wo-

m[illegible] pla[illegible]ell. [illegible]hate him in a [illegible]rank the hot liquor like it was litt[illegible]fe, ar[illegible]he'd [illegible]use you'[illegible] be hinderin' h[illegible]

"You'd be mess[illegible]a such skunks them rustlers th[illegible] up on the rim. [illegible]ey guzzlin', fi[illegible]', cussin'. Yo're [illegible]y purty to look at and yuh'd cause trou[illegible]e a-plenty And some black night they'd kill Poe Parsons and that pack uh wolves would have yuh trapped Fer yore own sake, Mona, don't do nothin' foolish. If ever yuh went with Poe, it would be like touchin' off the fuse connected with a kaig uh powder. Them wolves would have yuh inside a month."

"Poe can handle a hundred like 'em. They've never been able to kill him yet, though some of 'em have tried to collect the bounty on him."

"He's bin plain lucky, that's all. No matter how fast a man is with a gun, there's always another man that's faster. He'll git his."

"YOU'LL take that bounty off Poe's hide?" Mona came back to the subject abruptly.

Jude Quillan's jaws tightened. With Poe Parsons alive, his plans would never be completed. Only with the dangerous Poe dead could he hope to attain his goal. A goal he had fought for all his life, since he was old enough to dream of a future. Now, with that envious goal in sight, with that empire almost within his grasp, to lose it?

"Poe Parsons has got to go!" His mismated eyes were hard as flint now as he faced his daughter.

Mona Quillan's face was pale under its tan. Her red lips tightened to a thin, straight line. They looked alike now, that father and daughter who had inherited much of his nature.

For a long minute they stood there, staring into each others' eyes. Then, without a word, without a gesture, Mona turned and unbarred the door. The door closed behind her. Jude Quillan was alone.

Jude dropped back into his chair, a choking sob breaking from his dry throat. He had lost the only person on earth that he really cared for. Mona had left him. She had deserted him in his hour of need. Grief gave way to a distorted sense of injustice done him. He reached for the [illegible]. or the [illegible] time in his life, Jude Quillan drank hi[illegible]lf senseless. For the first time since he had settled in Apache Basin, he forgot to bar the door of his cabin. . . .

Jude awoke at daylight. His head ached and his hands were shaky. It took almost a quart of whiskey to straighten him up. He soused his head in the water bucket and dried on an old flannel shirt. Then he took a high powered rifle from the gun rack and shoved the magazine full of cartridges. Next he buckled on his heavy cartridge belt with its cedar handled .45. His eyes were red-shot and slitted. His mouth was a crooked, cruel line under his hawklike nose.

No need to look in Mona's room. She would be gone. At the stable he saddled his grain fed horse and shoved the rifle into its worn scabbard.

Wes Quillan and fat Ed, together with some other men, were at the corral catching their horses. Jude passed them by without apparently seeing them. He rode with his hat pulled low across his slitted eyes. Out the gate and onto the trail that led out of the Basin and up onto the rim where Poe Parsons and his wolves ranged.

Jude Quillan was setting out to kill Poe Parsons wherever he found him.

IX

THE town of Rawhide was a cluster of frame and log buildings at the foot of the mountains. The cabins were scattered among the pine trees in a careless manner, for those who built there had simply chosen a spot they liked and built a house there.

The main street, which was the only street in the little town, was composed of three saloons, a general store which was also the Post Office, a small restaurant operated by the only Chinaman in town, a feed barn, the log cabin that was the sheriff's office, and another cabin that was the stage office which was operated by the Justice of the Peace. Back on a side road, hidden in the pines, were several small cabins with red curtains and a larger frame building that was Rawhide's honkytonk and dance hall.

The rocky slopes behind the town were

pitted with prospect holes and [sha]fts. Before daylight, a[nd] don't [wo]rk long." Three small mines were being o[pe]rated on shifts. Up the creek was a small stamp mill. Ore wagons, drawn by raw-boned mules, creaked up and down the gulch above the town.

During the day the little town was quiet save for the few miners who were off shift and lounging around. Perhaps a horse or two tied to one of the hitch-racks in front of a saloon. A sheepherder sitting on the edge of the plank sidewalk, his dog between his knees, dozing off a jag. The blatant noise of a scratchy phonograph. The rattle of heavy chinaware in the restaurant. The few respectable women of the town seldom appeared on the main street. They gathered at each other's homes to trade their little gossip and drink tea together. Sometimes they met on Saturdays at the little schoolhouse back in the pines. But they came to the store and returned to their little homes as quickly as possible. For Rawhide was, for its size, a tough little town. Its boot hill, quarter of a mile down the gulch, vouched for that fact.

It was at night that Rawhide came to life. There was the banging of tin-pan pianos, the rough voices of men cursing or singing or laughing at some ribald joke. There was the hum of the roulette wheels, the click of poker chips, the pleading voice of some gambling man trying to throw his seven. Faro and chuck-a-luck. White lights and yellow lights there on the main street. And glimmering through the pines, the winking red lights of the cabins beyond.

It was some time between midnight and dawn when Poe Parsons rode up the main street of Rawhide. Instead of leaving his horse with the other horses at the hitch-rack, or stabling the animal, he rode off into a cluster of scrub pines where he dropped the hackamore rope across the limb of a tree. For a long moment he held the soft muzzle of the handsome bay against his cheek.

The horse nibbled softly at his face and Poe talked in a low tone to the gelding. A few lumps of sugar.

"And no matter what horse comes along, Monte, not one nicker out of you, sabe? Because it won't do to let 'em know where you are, old son. I'll be needing you be-

Poe Parsons [th]umbed back the hammer of his white handled gun [in] the holster. It slid free with a swift, [sm]ooth, unbroken movement. Then he shoved the gun back into the scabbard and slipped through the pines to the main street.

PROBABLY a dozen horses stood at the hitch-racks in front of the three saloons. Poe lit one of his Mexican cigarets and walked, with just the hint of a swagger, into the saloon above the door of which was a sign labeled *"The Maverick."*

Stepping through the swinging half-doors, Poe stepped to the bar. A sleek, red cheeked, white jacketed bartender greeted him with a cordial smile.

"Same old medicine, Poe?"

Poe nodded. "Bourbon, Steve. Open a new bottle."

The bartender looked hurt. "Hell, Poe, you know durn well I wouldn't doctor your booze. Ain't you known me long enough to trust me?"

"You're not the only bartender that works here, Steve. I trust you, sure. But there's two other men besides you that work behind this bar. And there's the swamper. I can't afford to take chances. Open a fresh bottle and put it on the back bar where I can see it all the time. How's business?"

"About the same. Want to check up the jack?"

"Not now. The games making anything?"

The bartender shrugged his thick shoulders. "Everything but the stud game that Lefty Cass is runnin'. Night before last he drops fifteen hundred smackers and last night he goes in the hole another thousand. He's losin' again tonight."

"And Zeb Quillan is doing the winning," nodded Poe.

"He is," agreed Steve, "but how in hell did you know?"

"The rustling of the leaves, Stephen. I didn't buy this place with the expectation of making a lot of money. If we break even, I'm satisfied. But I don't digest the idea of some tin-horn like Lefty Cass losing the bankroll. Is he drunk?"

"Clear sober, Poe."

"Hopped up?"

d use d Steve snorted. "And abrace." Poe smiled amiably.
still e lose uillan. a quick, meaning glance pass
smells bad, S between ty and Zeb Quillan. Lefty
"Stinks like a took a vacant chair at the table and bought
Poe filled a sma s from the newly a stack of chips. Poe called for a new
bottle. Ste ook a small beer. deck, broke open the seal, and shuffled the
rank. pasteboards with deft swiftness.
eve," said Poe Parsons, "there may This was the first time Poe Parsons had
be a little ruckus here tonight. Keep your ever banked a game in his own place. It
eyes open. Any strangers here?" was, in fact, the first time that any man
"That big guy standin' at the end of the there had ever seen the outlaw handle a
bar." deck of cards.
"The drunken cowboy?" Poe's back was against the wall of the
Steve leaned across the bar and his voice building. He faced Zeb and the bar where
dropped to a whisper. "He ain't half as the psuedo-drunken cowboy leaned.
drunk as he lets on. A school kid could Lefty sat in the chair on Zeb's right. Poe's
stand up under what booze he's put away. black eyes swept the crowd beyond. There
Most of his whiskey goes into the spittoon, were two or three Quillan men there. He
get me?" smiled grimly and began dealing.
"I get you. Thanks, Steve, old boy. "Zeb," he said pleasantly, "I'm betting
When the racket starts, take care of the five hundred dollars, before I look at my
lights." hole card, that it's higher than yours."
Steve smiled and nodded. Poe walked "Call that." Zeb's face seemed to red-
down the bar and past the big red faced den a little. He was not expecting a bet
cowpuncher who seemed to be drunk. Poe, like that but he could not back down.
with a sidelong glance, saw a pair of keen, Card after card. The pot increased in
greenish eyes follow him as he made his size. Zeb's two queens were high. He
way to the stud table. bet a hundred dollars. Poe was the only
man to call. Poe, with an ace in sight.
HALF a dozen men were playing. The Zeb grinned.
dealer was a sallow faced, pale eyed, "Beat them two queens, Poe?"
thin lipped man of slender build. This "Two aces usually does it, Zeb. And
was Lefty Cass, gambler and gunman. The your hole card?" Poe flipped over his hole
green eyeshade he wore cast a ghastly hue card, an ace. Zeb's face grew redder. He
across the upper part of his face. He had a king in the hole.
looked up at Poe and his lips tightened a Poe raked in the pot. "I'll take that five
little. He nodded, then went back to his hundred now, Zeb."
business of dealing. "Ain't my word good?"
Across from the dealer sat Zeb Quil- "No man's word is good in this place,"
lan. Tall, rawboned, hawk nosed, with a said Poe. "The green money talks here."
heavy jaw that bristled with several days' Zeb laughed harshly and counted five
growth of whiskers. He leered up at Poe. hundred dollars from a thick roll of bills.
"H'are ya, Poe?" "Next hand, Zeb, I'll give you a chance
"Able to be around, Zeb. Looks like to win back. Make it a thousand dollars.
Lady Luck is your sweetheart." Or is that too steep for an Apache Basin
"Don't it, though?" gambling man?"
Poe looked on for several hands. He "You can't bluff me, Poe Parsons. Hell,
kept his back to the wall and never for make 'er two thousand."
more than an instant did he quit watching "And I'll up you another thousand. Put
the big cowpuncher who was pretending to the money on the table now."
be drunk.
Zeb Quillan raked in another pot. Poe A CROWD was gathering. Among
signaled Lefty to get up from the table. the crowd was the big red faced cow-
"I'll take the deal. You can cheek in puncher. He stood, not so unsteady on his
with Steve or sit in the game. I'm go- legs now, behind Zeb's chair. Poe and
ing to woo Lady Luck away from Zeb's Zeb Quillan counted out their money.

"Supposing," said Poe, "that I leave the others out this time. I'll just deal cards. High card wins."

Zeb pushed his chair back a little. He shoved his hat back on his head and looked over his left shoulder. His glance met the eyes of the red faced cowboy. Poe Parsons cast a swift look in the direction of Lefty Cass. Lefty's tongue wetting a pair of dry lips. Poe had seen Lefty when he was about to jerk a gun. That tongue always flicked out, like the tongue of a snake.

Poe slid two cards from the pack. They lay there, face down, on the green cloth. Now his hands were empty of cards. He sat in his chair, his feet on either side of the front legs of the chair. Now he nodded to Lefty Cass.

"Turn both cards over, Lefty."

The gambler turned over Zeb's card first. The king of spades. Zeb grinned widely. Now Lefty flipped over Poe's card. The ace of spades.

"Damn you, Poe, this is crooked!" snarled Zeb. "You ain't gettin' away with . . . "

Poe's left hand grabbed the money and over went the table. The gun in the hand of the red faced cowpuncher roared, but its slug went wild. His big frame slumped across the litter of chairs and spilled chips. There was a round, black hole between his eyes and a larger one at the back of his skull where Poe's soft nosed .45 slug had torn its way through.

Lefty Cass crouched back in his chair, his left hand a bloody, broken mass of flesh and bone. Poe's gun now covered Zeb Quillan.

"Unless you want breakfast in hell, Zeb, keep away from your gun. And stand with your hands up while I tell you what kind of a skunk you are.

"You frame it with Lefty Cass to make some big wins at my place. You see to it that news of Lefty's losings reach me up on the rim. You know I'll come here to see what is going on. And you've got that big red muzzled hunk of beef here to kill me. But it didn't work, did it, Zeb? It takes a man with brains to cook up a deal like that and brains is something that you sorely lack. I took back my money. I got your lousy gunman. I've spoiled Lefty Cass from ever dealing another crooked card. Lady Luck left you, Zeb Quillan. Go back to your sheep. Tell Jude what's done. I'll [illegible] you, his [illegible] Now you and every man that's with him up against that wall. Don't any of you leave this place for fifteen minutes unless he wants a ticket to hell."

Poe, his gun covering the crowd, backed toward a side door. Now his left hand found the knob and the door opened.

"Let 'er go, Steve!"

There was the thudding, crashing roar of a repeating shotgun. The sound of smashed glass. The place was in thick, smoke filled darkness.

Poe Parsons ran for the thicket where he had left his horse. A few minutes later and he was riding at a run down the street and out onto the open trail. Now he slowed to a long, tireless lope. He lit a cigaret and filled his lungs with the smoke of the heavy Mexican tobacco. Instead of taking the trail that led to the rim, Poe Parsons rode along the wagon road that would take him to the Harker ranch.

X

SO it was that Jude Quillan, pushing his horse hard, failed to find Poe Parsons at the horse camp on the rim. Nor was Mona anywhere to be found.

"Where's Poe Parsons?" he spat at the men gathered around the campfire where fresh meat and beans and hot bread and coffee were cooking.

"Dunno, Jude. He pulled out night afore last and he ain't showed up since. Light and set, Jude."

"If I thought you was a-lyin'," rasped Jude. "I'd kill yuh."

"We got no call to lie to yuh, Jude. Why should we be a-lyin'?"

"Seen anything uh that gal uh mine? Mona?"

"Nary sign. She ain't bin up here on the rim fer two-three weeks. Not since she roped that big spotted steer an' tied him down by herse'f."

Jude stepped down off his horse. He reached for the whiskey jug and drank like the stuff was water. He wolfed some food, then rode away. The eyes of the renegades followed him.

They all hated Jude Quillan. Hated him because he treated them like they were

...l dogs. Hated him because ... Apac... keep st... in' ol...

"Ornery o...

"Looks like he ...in' fer Poe, per...l."

...ore does. An... e Mona gal is miss... ...ome. What d... uh make uh that?"

"Same as you do. ... e and her has run off. We lose our chief, Jude Quillan loses his gal. And the ol' son is on their trail. He's gonna kill Poe an' save payin' that bounty he's put up. Pass that jug."

"Poe bein' gone," said a wide mouthed, snub nosed, tow headed cowpuncher with a drooping corn colored mustache, "we better be electin' a new chief. I hereby nominates myself, Tom Macey, for the job. Has any uh you gents got objections?"

He had gotten to his feet and stood on widespread legs, thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt, a wide grin on his face. A swaggering, burly, rough and tumble bully, Tom Macey.

"It takes brains," drawled a swarthy Texan who squatted on his boot heels, "to ramroad a spread like this 'un. I'm wonderin', Macey, where yo're gonna borrow the brains yuh'll need."

"All the brains I need," said the towheaded bully, still grinning, "I pack around in this gun."

The two shots blended as one. The Texan was on his hands and knees now, blood spilling from his mouth. Tom Macey stood there, swaying on his feet, a crimson blotch on his shirt. Now the Texan fired again. Still Tom Macey kept his feet, though he was mortally hit. He thumbed back the hammer of his gun. Slowly. His grin was now a grisly grimace.

He took steady aim. His gun roared.

The Texan slid forward on his face, shot through the head. Tom Macey stood there, his smoking gun slipping from his numbing fingers. Then his knees buckled and he collapsed, his gray flannel shirt soggy with blood.

"So-long, boys," he muttered. He was dead when some one of the gang sought to give him a last drink from the jug.

The double killing had its effect on the others. Tom Macey and the Texan were rated as the two toughest men of the renegade gang. The bodies were carried off to ...e side and covered with the same ...p. The jug went the rounds as the ...ng dis...ed the double killing.

"Somebo... had ought to kinda jigger the spread," said a weasened, leathery faced man with bowed legs and bald head. "We'd better take a vote on it."

"Why don't you take the job, Baldy? Yo're the oldest hand amongst us?"

"Baldy suits me," agreed another.

"Them in favor uh Baldy raise their hand."

THE vote seemed to be unanimous. Baldy, the undersized, bow legged veteran of the dim trails was proclaimed leader of the pack. Again and again the jug went the rounds. And of them all, Baldy was the only one who did not fully satisfy his thirst for the corn likker. Baldy pretended to drink but only a small quantity of the whiskey went down his throat. This in spite of the fact that Baldy was as fond of a jug as a bridegroom is fond of his bride. For Baldy had ridden too many crooked trails in the company of tough men to get drunk now. Whiskey had dethroned too many bandit leaders. He knew that, among the tough crew who toasted his leadership, there were a few who desired that job. So he sat with his back against a big pine tree and drank only enough to keep his innards warm.

Not only did he watch the crew of drunken renegades. His keen eyes, puckered at the corners, watched the shadows beyond. Because this weasened little old outlaw did not believe that Poe Parsons had deserted them. He reckoned that Poe would return to camp, mebbyso fetching the Mona gal with him. This time, for keeps.

Baldy knew what that meant. Bad enough when the gal came up for a day. He'd seen the effect of her presence on this gang of tough cow thieves. How they all tried to show off when she was there. How they looked at her like they wanted to own her. Poe was a fool to ever let the gal come up here to camp. She just naturally raised hell with every man's nature. And if she showed up now, hell would pop for sure.

Baldy liked Mona Quillan. Mona had always treated Baldy human-like. Once, when he'd bin crippled up by a horse turn-

ing over with him, she'd fetched liniment up from the ranch. And she'd always talked to him when she came up. She never poked fun at his big head or his bow legs. And last Christmas she gave him half a dozen heavy wool shirts and six suits of thick underwear. Gawd knows he needed 'em too.

Baldy hated Poe for bringin' Mona Quillan up there amongst such a tough gang. But he'd stand by Poe and he'p him fight 'em off when that time came.

But Mona Quillan did not come that night. Nor did Poe Parsons show up. And at sunrise Baldy began to think that mebbyso Mona and Poe Parsons had quit the country, sure enough.

Most of the gang were sleeping off their booze. Only one or two staggered around. Baldy, failing to rouse the cook, set about getting breakfast. He was making biscuits when, from somewhere in the distance, there came the sound of a shot. Two shots. Then silence. Baldy wiped the dough from his hands, got his carbine, and saddling his picketed horse, rode away from camp without a word to the two drunken outlaws who were shooting crap on a saddle blanket.

The puckered eyes of the weasened little old outlaw were glittering dangerously as he rode with his carbine across his lap. He kept off the main trail and followed a twisted course through the pines. Just what he expected to find, he did not know. But he was ready for anything.

XI

IT was Pete Ellison who brought word to Bob Harlan, the evening of the day that Rusty had started for the Harker ranch, that Jude Quillan had every trail in Apache Basin guarded. That his tough gunmen had orders to bring in every man who rode those trails. No killings unless it was absolutely necessary, but if it came to a showdown, to shoot.

"Then Rusty ain't got a rabbit's chance, Pete," said Bob Harlan, taking his Winchester from its rack. "They'll git him."

Bob put on his hat.

"Where yuh goin', Bob?"

"I'm goin' to find out what they done to that red-headed pardner uh mine. He stuck by me, Pete. I'll [illegible] him."

"You'll g[illegible] he got [illegible]nehea[illegible] What chance have [illegible] him any good?"

"I dunno, Pe[illegible] I know is that if I didn't make a t[illegible]'d feel lower [illegible] snake's belly."

"Let's grab a [illegible]e tuh eat befo[illegible] go, then."

"This ain't one uh them we jobs, Pete," explained Bob Harlan. "I'm goin' alone. Two men together is a heap more dangerous than if I ride alone. I'll keep off the main trails and Injun 'em. Just do a little scoutin'. There's a lot uh tricks I learned up home from the Injuns that will help me slip past their guards. If they got Rusty at the Quillan ranch, I'll spring him loose if I have tuh fill Jude and his three sons full uh lead. Pete, you take another route back to yore place. Git Frank Harker an' Dad Harker an' all the men you kin gather. Jude is fixin' to su'prise us an' we better beat him to the draw if we don't want to be massacred. I'll join yuh as soon as I kin."

It was dusk when Bob Harlan set out. He rode a gaunt flanked, hammer headed, rat-tailed, line-backed dun horse that could cover more ground on slim rations than any horse in the country. A vicious tempered, tough, game-hearted horse that no man but Bob could approach without being met by flinty hoofs and snapping teeth. Even Bob had to always be on guard when he came near the big dun horse.

"Strychnine," said Bob grimly, as he stepped up in the saddle, "you and me travels long and hard tonight."

Strychnine, when Bob's weight was in the saddle, suddenly broke in two. Pitching and bawling, while Bob sat his saddle with a wide grin. Strychnine never failed to buck every time he was saddled. Then the ugly hammer head came up, the white eyes rolled back. And the big dun horse hit a long, rough trot that ate up the miles.

Avoiding the main trails, keeping always off the main traveled roads, Bob Harlan headed across country for the Quillan ranch.

Mile after mile. Hour after hour. Bob had skirted Jude Quillan's outposts. He kept the big dun horse at the same long gaited pace. He rode with his gun near

hi[illegible]s eyes peering into the night. He[illegible]d must be[illegible]night.

Su[illegible]ay h[illegible]oulled [illegible]a' jerk From out of th[illegible]d there came the sound of shots. [illegible]e shouts. The [illegible] of a woman. [illegible]oman calling for

JERKING his gun, Bob Harlan spurred the big dun horse to a run. Through some brush and trees he caught the yellow glow of a campfire. He heard a man laugh loudly. A woman's voice, husky with anger, rather than fear. Now Bob's better judgment made him slack his swift gait. He slowed to a trot, then a walk. Then he slid from the dun's back, his carbine ready. That big yellow horse, for all his ornery ways, would stand there in the shadow of the brush all night without being tied.

Now Bob went on foot, crouching low, his chaps and spurs left back on his saddle. He made no sound as he approached the campfire. Now he was within forty feet of the fire where four men, bearded, heavily armed, vicious looking, squatted around the fire. On the ground near them, bound hand and foot lay a man.

Bob crept closer, his carbine ready. Now he gave a slight start. That bound figure was not a man. He had caught a glimpse of the face. It was Mona Quillan.

Something inside Bob Harlan's body gripped his heart like an icy hand. He had never known Mona Quillan. But he had seen her a thousand times, usually in the company of Poe Parsons at the dances and rodeos. Bob caught himself trembling as if with a chill. There were beads of cold sweat on his forehead. The palms of his hands were moist and clammy. He crouched there, motionless, fighting for his self-control. He could see the girl's face, tanned, unafraid, and there was a gag made of her own gay colored neckscarf tied across her mouth.

The four men were looking at her with leering grins on their faces. They had evidently been hitting the jug that stood near the fire. As unsavory and vicious looking a quartet as a man would care to avoid on a dark night.

"She says she's the boss' daughter," chuckled one of the men. "Kin yuh beat that? Well, she might be, but she's a long ways from home tonight. I ain't kissed a gal in a coon's age."

"And yuh ain't a-kissin' this 'un, Heavy, till we lets the dice decide it."

"Jude put me in charge here," growled the big, black-bearded one they called Heavy, "and what I say goes."

"Like hell it does," snarled another one of the four. "Not in a case like this. This is outside uh the regular business hours, see? The dice decides it."

"You bet," put in the third member, reaching for the jug. "The winner gits the gal. And from the way she fought, he ain't gittin' no easy bargain, neither. Drag out the bones, Blackie."

NOW commenced the dice game. All four were absorbed in the game when a harsh, menacing voice ripped out of the shadows.

"Reach for the stars, you skunks!"

Instead of complying, all four men jerked their guns. Now those guns were spewing flame.

"Roll into the brush, Mona!" yelled Bob Harlan, and punctuated the command with a shot that sent the big black-bearded man to his knees, writhing in pain. Now Bob's carbine was cracking like a machine gun. He kept shifting his position.

Another man was down now, and a third was shot in the shoulder. The fourth man, crouched in the brush, was giving Bob a heated battle. The other three, wounded, started to crawl into the brush.

"Stay where yuh lay, yuh skunks!" barked Bob, "or I'll kill yuh now!"

Now the fourth man had evidently changed his mind about fighting it out. Bob's bullets were clipping the twigs too close to his head. The swift pounding of hoofs told of that fighting man's precipitate departure. Bob called to the three wounded men.

"Stay in the firelight. Move one little bit and I'll plug yuh. Mebbyso I will, anyhow."

Now he slipped noiselessly through the brush. A few moments later his knife had freed Mona from the ropes that bound her. He helped her to her feet and together they slipped away into the darkness. The girl seemed weak and Bob had to help her mount her horse.

"Hurt, Mona?" he whispered.

"Not much. Never mind it. Let's get out of here."

They made their way to where Bob had left his horse. He mounted and they rode on. Bob kept watching her. Mona was swaying a little in her saddle. When they were far enough away from the camp of the hired gunmen of Jude Quillan, Bob reined up. They were on the bank of a small creek.

"Now," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "let's see how badly you're hurt."

As he lifted her from the saddle, she went limp in his arms. Making a pillow of his jumper, Bob laid her unconscious form on the grassy bank of the creek. He filled his hat with water and bathed her face. Now her eyes opened, their smoky gray depths seared with pain.

"I owe you more than I can ever pay back, Bob Harlan," she said, trying to sit up. Bob pushed her back gently.

"Never mind that," he told her. "Yo're hurt. Just lay quiet while we take a look at this shoulder. It's goin' tuh hurt some."

"I can stand that, Bob."

BOB HARLAN felt his blood pulse harder. Mona Quillan, who had never spoken to him before, had called him by his first name. Gosh, that was somethin' to remember. Bob found a flask of whiskey in his chaps pocket and made her swallow some of the fiery stuff. Then, with his pocket knife, he cut away her flannel shirt from the collar to the elbow. In the uncertain light of the moon, for he dared not kindle a fire, Bob's fingers gently, skilfully examined the bullet hole in the girl's shoulder. Luckily it had been a steel jacket bullet and had gone through above her armpit without hitting the bone. He poured raw whiskey in the wound and used his undershirt to bandage it.

"It's a clean undershirt. Just put 'er on this evenin'. Better take another nip uh this likker, Mona."

"I hate the stuff," she told him. "This is the first time I ever tasted it. The men of my family do enough drinking for all of us. I'm feeling better now."

"Yuh stood it mighty game," said Bob. "I've seen tough men whimper when whiskey was poured into a bullet hole. It shore stings. I know from experience."

"Yes. When you were shot by one of the Quillan tribe," said Mona [illegible] tersely. "I[illegible] white o[illegible] ... Quillan's daughter. Not many men would [illegible] what you did for the daughter of a man who wants you killed or run out of the country. But I always knew you were a white man . . . even when you have always treated me like I was afflicted with sheep ticks."

"Shucks. . . . Gosh, Mona, I never meant it like that. I always figgered you hated cowfolks!"

"I hate sheep as bad as you do. I hate it all. Why shouldn't I hate it? Do you think I enjoy going to dances where Poe Parsons and a few of the men in town are the only ones that ever ask me to dance? Do you think it is easy being the daughter of Jude Quillan here in Apache Basin. Where I'm hated and snubbed and laughed at. Where they say all sorts of things about me. They say I'm wild and bad and that I'm Poe Parsons' woman. They say worse than that. They hate me, and I hated them back. Do you know where I was going when those men stopped me?"

"No, I don't reckon I do, Mona."

"I was going up on the rim to give myself to Poe Parsons. To marry him and follow him to hell." Her smoky eyes were bitter now, and her red mouth twitched at the corners.

"I reckon Poe thinks yo're the only woman on earth," said Bob. "Some ways, Poe's one uh the finest men I ever met, for all he's a rustler. There's a heap to Poe Parsons. I don't blame yuh for lovin' him."

"But supposing I don't love him?"

"Then why would yuh be ridin' off up there to marry him?"

Mona laughed a little. A broken queer little laugh that was more like a sob. There were tears in her eyes. The first tears that any man had ever seen there.

"I think, Bob Harlan," she said in a husky voice, "I'd better be riding on. On up to the horse camp on the rim."

"Yeah? Ride thirty miles over that rough trail with a bullet hole in yuh and mebbyso more uh them skunks tuh stop yuh again? I reckon not. I'm takin' yuh to yore home ranch."

Mona shook her head. "I'm not going back to the ranch. Not tonight. Not ever. My father and I quit last eve-

[illegible] mind why. But I never want to [illegible] again."

"[illegible] about more [illegible]

"She's not [illegible] mother [illegible] hates me. Zeb and Luke and [illegible] sons. My [illegible] was a dance [illegible] girl in Jaurez. [illegible] died, she [illegible] Jude Quillan take [illegible] because I was [illegible] daughter. Jude's wife [illegible] me. The [illegible] are jealous of me. Jude Quillan was the only one who ever treated me decently. And now he and I have quit. There's nothing left, you see, but for me to go to Poe Parsons. Poe loves me. He's never been unkind to me. He'd die for me. So you see, Bob Harlan, you'd better let me go on along my own trail. On up the trail to the rim. Life with Poe will be exciting, anyhow. And I'll be among my own kind . . . beyond the boundary lines of society where I don't belong. Now, will you let me go, Bob?"

"No." Bob's drawling voice was firm, uncompromising. "Yuh'd never make it, Mona. Yuh won't go home. We can't git through to the Harker ranch or the Ellison place. So I reckon our one best bet is for us to go back to my place. I'll send somebody for the doctor. Then, when yo're able to travel, I'll ride with yuh up to the rim and turn yuh over to Poe for better or worse. Let's git goin'."

"To your place, Bob?"

"It's the only place left, seems like."

Mona got to her feet slowly. Bob made her take another swallow of whiskey. And so they rode through the starlit night and into a red dawn. And the last ten miles of the trail Bob Harlan carried Mona Quillan, weak and half conscious, in his arms, while her horse trailed behind.

At his cabin, Bob put her on his bunk. He made a fire in the stove and heated water. Then he forced some more whiskey down the girl's throat and set about his task of playing doctor and nurse. Once, when Mona lay there, her eyes closed, her white face pillowed against the jet black curls, Bob bent over her and kissed her. Her closed eyelids with their thick black fringe of lashes, quivered a little and the cowpuncher drew back guiltily, his face crimson. His hands shook as he cut away the blood-soaked bandage and bathed the wound with warm water that had a few drops of carbolic acid in it. The ivory white shoulder with its ugly wound. Bob was thankful that the doctor, when he had come to patch up his leg, had left a good supply of bandages and dressings.

Mona's eyes opened after a while. She smiled a little when she found Bob's hand holding one of hers. When he would have let it go, she tightened her clasp. Then her eyes closed again and Bob sat there for a long time, holding her hand in his. He had given her one of the little pills the doctor had left him to ease the pain. And after a time when her deep breathing told Bob that she was asleep, he left his seat beside the bunk and went about his usual chores outside.

HE kept watching for some chance rider whom he might hail, but nobody showed up. At noon, Mona was awake, but Bob knew that she had a fever, for her face was flushed and her hands were hot and dry.

"I got some hot tea for yuh, and some chicken soup that come in a can. That dude huntin' party that was through here last fall left me a lot uh that fancy canned stuff. And here's a nightshirt. I'll go on out to the barn while yuh git fixed. I got yore boots off." He flushed crimson and Mona laughed at his embarrassment.

While he was at the barn, Bob sighted a man on horseback. He saddled a horse and rode to intercept the rider, who proved to be a cowboy on his way to Rawhide.

"Tell the doctor to git to my place quick as he kin make it. He's needed bad. But don't say anything to anybody else and tell doc to keep his mouth shut. A . . . friend uh mine has bin shot. And you better take the outside trail to town, feller, because Jude Quillan has the other trails guarded. If you want to see Rawhide, rim out of the basin and foller the trail under the rim to the Ellison place, past Harker's and on up the Rawhide to town. Because Jude's set to make war."

The cowpuncher thanked Bob, and agreed to get the doctor down from town if he had to rope and drag him.

Bob went back to the cabin. He kept thinking of Rusty. Finding Mona Quillan wounded had halted his plan to find the red-haired cowboy.

Mona's clothes were hung on a nail behind a blanket curtain in the corner. She

was propped up against the pillows, reading a book that Margaret Harker had loaned him. Margaret's name was on the flyleaf.

"You look worried, Bob," she told him. "I'm sorry I'm such a pest."

"It's my pardner Rusty that's frettin' me. He set out for the Harker place."

"And he no doubt got there," said Mona. "Poe went with him." And she told Bob part, but not quite all of the story of her meeting Rusty.

Bob grinned his appreciation. "He's one in a thousand, that boy. Old friend uh the Harker family. So Poe taken him there? That won't be good news for Jude."

"No." Mona looked at the book and smiled. "Or for Bob Harlan."

"Meanin' what, Mona?"

"Your pardner may beat your time with a certain young lady. He's come clear from Montana to see her." With a sudden gesture, Mona tossed the book onto the table near the bunk. "Loan me the makin's, cowboy."

Bob handed her tobacco and papers. "I'd be right proud tuh see Rusty and Margaret git married," he said quietly. "I'd shore like tuh dance at their weddin'."

XII

POE PARSONS and Rusty rode away together from the Harker ranch. Poe had visited the Harkers a few times before, and had found a welcome there. An admitted cattle rustler and gun fighter still he had, several times in the past, done them favors which they could not ignore. Now he had come, with the dawn, to their ranch, had talked for perhaps half an hour with Rusty, and as a result of this conversation between them, Rusty had bade the Harkers a brief and somewhat mysterious farewell. But Frank Harker and his father both knew, without being told, that Rusty had ridden away with Poe to find and kill the man who had murdered Babe Harker.

Poe had also talked briefly with the two Harkers.

"Take your women," Poe had told them, "and go to the Ellison ranch. Get every cowpuncher you can find. Jude means war and he's going to strike without giving warning. Probably tonight."

So Poe Parsons and Rusty left [illegible] ker ranch [illegible] k the trail [illegible] to th[illegible] some od[illegible] ate, they missed [illegible] Quillan [illegible] no h[illegible] quit the rim and c[illegible] to the bas[illegible]

Jude, like a ma[illegible] rtured, could summon the patie[illegible] to wait up rim. His brain s[illegible] ed on fire. [illegible] like a man gone [illegible] d. His one [illegible] was to kill. To find [illegible] be Parsons an[illegible] Mona and shoot Poe d[illegible] wn where he fou[illegible] him. Then to gather his gunmen and sweep Apache Basin from one end to the other. Killing any man who would not run. Driving every man in the basin out of the range he coveted. The pockets of his chaps bulged with yellow banknotes. He would buy them out at his own price. If they refused to sell, he would kill them. The only law he knew was Jude Quillan's law. Made reckless by Mona's desertion, he was now determined to force the issue. Today, tonight. And God have mercy on the man who tried to halt him.

As he left the horse camp after failing to find Poe there, he met a horseman. It was one of the quartet who had captured Mona and had been put to flight by the unseen gun wielder who had rescued her. The man had ridden to the rim to join Poe's outfit. He and Jude met face to face.

"What the hell you doin' up here?" snarled Jude.

For reply, the fellow went for his gun. Jude's six-shooter spewed fire. Once. Twice. The tough gunman pitched sideways from his saddle. Jude rode on without even glancing at the bloody, huddled body that lay alongside the trail.

Shoving fresh cartridges in his gun, Jude rode on, his bloodshot eyes staring ahead. On down into the Apache Basin. He met his son Luke.

"Gather yore men, Luke. Meet me at the ranch. Seen Poe Parsons?"

"No. Zeb ribbed a game that he figgered would ketch Poe in town. If the trick worked, Poe Parsons is plenty dead by now."

Luke explained Zeb's trick. Jude's eyes glittered.

"If Zeb pulled 'er off," he growled, "I'll make him a present uh ten thousand dollars. Seen ary sign uh Mona?"

"Nary sign. I just come down from the

[illegible]os. We'll meet at the ranch?"
[illegible]down. Have [illegible] man yuh
got [illegible]S yuh later

JUL[illegible]rode on at [illegible]ot. Gathering in his men [illegible] found Wes Quillan much to the [illegible]ief of young Wes, [illegible] cuss him ou[illegible] for letting Rusty get [illegible]tter of him.

"G[illegible]se men and [illegible]et at the ranch at sun[illegible]yn. Seen Mona[illegible]

"Not [illegible]nce she left the [illegible]anch. Where'd she go? Don't you know?"

"How in hell do I know?" Jude rode on once more.

At the ranch he found Zeb and some of the Quillan riders.

"Did yuh git Poe Parsons?" was Jude's first question.

"No—he got away. Killed that big feller that claimed he was fast with a gun. I tell yuh, that Poe Parsons is. . . ."

"Git outa my sight, yuh whinin' whelp! I got no time fer to listen to excuses. Git yore men ready tuh pull out at dark. Come near my cabin before then and I'll fill yore belly full uh buckshot."

Jude turned his horse over to the stable man, gave orders to have a fresh horse grained and saddled by sundown, then stalked over to his private cabin.

Behind the barred door, he drank heavily from his jug, then dropped into his chair. And there he sat, drinking and muttering and cursing, until darkness approached. Then he quit his cabin and went to the bunk-house.

"Zeb, take yore men and head for the Ellison place. If they won't sign this bill uh sale, run 'em off or kill 'em."

He handed Zeb a package of banknotes. "Luke, you draw the Harker place. Here's their bill uh sale and the money tuh buy 'em. Try not tuh kill or hurt the wimmen. Killin' wimmen sets bad in court. Yore orders are the same as Zeb's." He turned now to Wes, the youngest and most dangerous of the three sons.

"You ride with yore men to Bob Harlan's. You don't need money. He's done too much a'ready ag'in us. Kill him an' burn the place down. Take three men with yuh. That'll be a-plenty."

He stood there in the lantern light, a terrible figure of a man. A killer, if ever one stalked the night.

The stable man brought up a fresh horse. For a moment he regarded it uncertainly, then mounted abruptly.

'Where a[illegible] you goin', paw?" asked Zeb.

"I'm a-goin after Poe Parsons."

XIII

"AND the name of the skunk that killed Babe Harker?" asked Rusty, as he and Poe climbed the steep trail to the rim.

"When the sign is right, Rusty, I'll tell you. But not now. Because I don't want you to make any foolish move that will mean a bullet in your briskit. You're too impulsive, pardner, and you'd be apt to go at it all wrong. You'll know your man when the time is ripe, but not until then. In case anything should happen to me, his name is on a slip of paper in my shirt pocket. Now let's go up to camp and see how my wolves are faring. I have a hunch, Rusty, that all is not so good up there. So keep your gun handy. They're a pack of jackals."

They rode on up the trail.

"We'll need 'em, though, tonight, Rusty. Jude has a lot of men."

It was high noon when they rode into the camp. Poe, riding in the lead, pulled up with a quick oath.

The camp on the rim was deserted. On all sides was strewn evidence of a hasty and untidy departure. Empty jugs, cold ashes of last night's campfire, an empty corral. Poe Parsons' gang had quit camp.

Poe lit one of his Mexican cigarets and smiled twistedly. "They must have smelled a hard fight coming. Hmmmm."

He swung off his horse and lifted an edge of the bloodstained tarp that covered the stiff bodies of the Texan and Tom Macey. His smile became a little more crooked.

Now a man stepped from the brush. It was little old Baldy. As Poe's gun covered him, Baldy cackled like a setting hen.

"They didn't take time tuh plant 'em, Poe. Doubt if they was a man of 'em sober enough tuh dig a grave, anyhow."

"Where'd they go, Baldy?"

"Town. I let 'em go. I was kinda juggerin' the spread, so I told 'em tuh hit fer town. Yuh see, Poe, I figgered yuh'd be fetchin' the Mona gal up an' they was

drunk an' primed fer raisin' hell. So I got shut of 'em. Did yuh meet up with Jude Quillan?"

"No. Why?"

"He's a-gunnin' for yuh. Gonna kill yuh on sight. He thinks the Mona gal has run off with yuh. Ain't she with yuh?"

"No." Poe's lips tightened. "You sure you're right about this, Baldy?"

"Plumb. Mona ran off from home. Four uh Quillan's men ketched her but some gent shot hell out of 'em and stole her away. I got it from one of 'em that Jude shot over yonder a ways. He talked afore he cashed in his chips. I figgered it was you as rescued her."

Poe shook his head. "Got a horse saddled, Baldy?"

"I have."

"Then get aboard. We've got a hard night ahead of us. I figured on my men being here so I could take 'em down into the Basin. Jude is planning on wiping out the Apache Basin tonight. Instead of twenty of us, there's three. You don't need to come unless you're willing, Baldy."

"The bigger the odds, the sweeter the fight, Poe. And I'm right worried about the Mona gal."

NOW the three men rode back down into the Apache Basin. They headed for the Ellison place. Mile after mile they rode in silence. Sunset, dusk, then night came with a white moon climbing the sky.

Baldy gave a sharp exclamation. "Looky yonder. Ain't that a fire?"

"It shore is," said Rusty.

"They've fired the Harker ranch," said Poe grimly. "The ball is rolling, boys. Hell's popping tonight."

Standing in their stirrups, they rode at a long trot. No need for words. Rusty whistled tunelessly through set teeth. Now, from a distance, they could hear the sound of gunfire. Half an hour and Poe gave the signal to pull up. They were within five hundred yards of the Ellison ranch. The night was filled with the rattle of gunfire. The ranch houses were in darkness, save for the intermittent flash of rifles poked through the improvised portholes between the log walls.

"We can do more here than if we tried to make the house. We'll split up. Each man for himself. Injun warfare, boys. Rusty, here is that slip of par[illegible] luck, pard[illegible] Good luck P[illegible] dad[illegible] com[illegible] ll have t[illegible] ul. [illegible]nless we're lucky [illegible]gh to [illegible] Jud[illegible] my. Baldy, you [illegible]ork [illegible]round tow[illegible] the barn. I'll take th[illegible]nt of the h[illegible] while [illegible]usty does [illegible] work arou[illegible] back."

As Baldy mov[illegible] away, Poe [illegible] to Rusty in a low t[illegible].

"I'm afraid, R[illegible]sty, that our pl[illegible] won't work out so b[illegible]ght as I thought. Not for me, anyhow. You'll understand what I mean when you see the name on that slip of paper. My men have quit me, as I knew they'd quit me some day. I'm a lone wolf now. But I've got a good stake saved and when this war is over, I'm pulling out for the Argentine. I'm going alone, most likely. I'll see you before I quit the country, though. But in case I don't, I left a letter for you with Margaret Harker. Open it when I'm gone."

He held out his hand. Rusty gripped it. Then they each faded into the night.

Rusty wormed his way on foot toward the rear of the ranch house. Now a dark form loomed up in front of him. The two almost collided. Rusty's carbine thudded against the man's head and the fellow dropped like a shot beef. Now the red-haired cowpuncher took the man's neckscarf and tied his hands behind his back. He ripped off the leg of the man's overalls and bound the unconscious man's ankles tightly. Then he stuffed part of the man's shirt in his mouth for a gag.

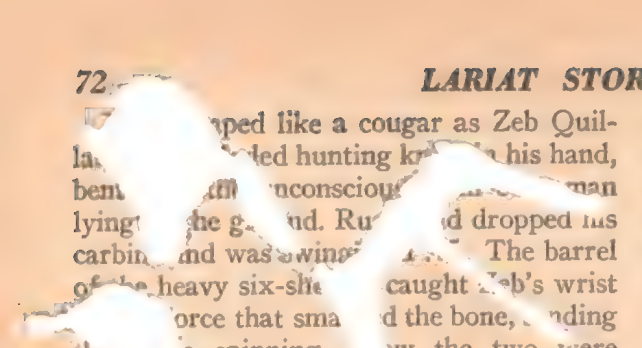
"Number one," he told himself grimly.

He crept on, crouching low, his carbine ready. He halted. Voices ahead, there in the shadow of some brush. Rusty crouched low, listening. He recognized the man who had been drunk the night they had raided Bob's cabin and found him there.

". . . I tell yur, Zeb, it's too raw fer me. I don't like it. Fightin' like we're doin' is not so bad, but hell, the feller is knocked out. Stickin' a knife in him, layin' here like he is, knowin nothin' about what's goin' on, that's too damned cold blooded for me. What if he is Frank Harker? I ain't yore man fer the job."

"Then gimme the knife, yuh lousy coward. I'll show yuh how to finish off a Harker like he. . . ."

"Yeah?"



ped like a cougar as Zeb Quil-
la led hunting k his hand,
ben nconscious man
lying he g nd. Ru d dropped his
carbin nd was swing The barrel
of he heavy six-she caught Zeb's wrist
force that sma d the bone, nding
th e spinning. w the two were
lock a tight deat rip. The gun in
Zeb's hand spat e. Rusty's six-
shoote ashed against e other's skull.
Zeb wen limp. Now Zeb's ompanion was
shooting. Rusty's gun belched red flame
and the man buckled up in a heap, his
right shoulder smashed and a bullet in his
leg.

RUSTY picked up the unconscious Frank Harker and pulled him into the black shadows. Other men were coming that way now. Rusty sent them back to cover with a fusillade of shots. Now his gun was empty and he was using Frank's six-shooter. Frank groaned in pain and sat up dizzily. Rusty whispered hoarsely.

"Easy, Frank, old boy. Take 'er easy. Hurt bad?"

"That you, Rusty?"

"Nobody else but, old hoss thief. Load my gun while I scare off these sheepherders. Work fast, boy, we're in a tight."

Now they came at Rusty, five or six shadowy forms. Frank and the red-headed cowboy pumped lead at them. Three men went down, cursing and calling for help.

"Time we got outa this," gritted Rusty. "Rent's due. Time tuh move. Let's go."

Dodging, twisting through the brush. Fighting, retreating, returning. Frank Harker and Rusty, side by side. Fighting like two machines. Frank had a cut scalp that smeared his face with blood. Rusty's left ear had been nicked by a bullet. But wherever they went, Quillan's gunmen had a taste of their hot lead.

From all indications, Poe Parsons and the weasened Baldy were doing their share. Now, in the darkness out there, news was spreading through the ranks of the Quillan men. Word passed from mouth to mouth that Poe Parsons had brought down his wolves and those wolves were silently, efficiently slaughtering the sheepman's army. Poe Parsons, but a black shadow in the shadow of the brush, heard the rumor spread like a prairie fire down the ranks of Quillan's men. They were getting uneasy, on the verge of panic. Now Poe made his way around to where he hoped to find Rusty. He had no trouble locating the red-haired cowboy and Frank Harker. They had taken shelter behind a pile of cordwood and were doing effective gun-work.

"Hi, Rusty!" he called softly, when there was a lull in the firing. "Hold your fire a minute."

"Come on, Poe."

Now Poe was with them. "We've got 'em scared, spooky. Let's get our horses. Charge 'em. They'll scatter like sheep."

They gathered in Baldy, who had run out of cartridges and was attempting to stalk some one of the enemy, rap him over the head, and replenish his supply of ammunition.

"Last 'un I knocked over was shootin' a danged .30-.30. Mine's .30-.40."

Now they were back where they had left their horses. Frank managed to steal a Quillan horse. With a wild yell, they charged boldly, each from a different direction.

The trick worked. The Quillan men, badly demoralized, not knowing how many men were attacking, fled as fast as their horses would carry them. But two men stood their ground. Standing erect, ignoring the advantage of the brushy shadows, stood Jude Quillan, jerking the lever of his Winchester. He had come from a fruitless search for Poe Parsons up on the rim. Alone, deserted by his men, even by his son Luke who, fleeing, dropped under Baldy's quick aim, Jude Quillan stood his ground. Fighting alone, snarling his hatred for his enemies, he stood on his long widespread legs, throwing lead at the men who came toward him.

Poe and Baldy, riding together now, Poe recognized the lanky sheepman and gave a curt order to his companion.

"Git away, Baldy. Pronto. He's my meat."

NOW Poe leaped from his horse. His white-handled gun was in his hand. He walked slowly toward Jude Quillan, who had dropped his rifle and drawn his old .45. Now Poe kept coming on. Slowly,

there under the white moon. Until but a scant thirty feet separated the two men. Neither man had raised his gun. Poe halted now.

"Ready, Jude?"

"I'm ready, you scoundrel."

"Count to ten, Jude. At ten we open up."

Jude counted. Slowly, in a rasping voice that was harsh with hatred for the man he faced.

". . . Eight . . . nine . . . ten!"

Now their guns roared. Both men on their feet. Thumbing the hammers of their six-shooters. Now Jude went down. He lay motionless. While Poe Parsons, his smoking gun in his hand, walked steadily across the intervening space, to stand over Jude's dead body.

Parsons shoved the white-handled gun into his holster. With steady hands he lit one of his gold-tipped Mexican cigarets. As he cupped the match flame in his hands, Rusty rode up. Poe, his face a little white and drawn looking, looked up at the red-haired cowboy.

"You can tear up that slip of paper now, Rusty. Here lays your man. Better, much better, that I did the job, no? . . . The king is . . . dead."

"Gosh, Poe, yo're hit. Yore shirt is all blood! Man, yuh're hurt bad."

Rusty was off his horse now. But Poe Parsons motioned him back.

"Couple of ribs nicked, perhaps. Nothing to get excited about. I gave him his chance but he must have been too drunk to shoot straight. We'll go into the house and I'll get taped up: Have a ride to make. Get somebody to carry Jude inside. After all, the old hellion had guts, Rusty. More guts than the rest of his pack combined. He deserves a decent laying out."

Poe walked on to the house, Rusty at his side. Now lights were being lit, though the shades were pulled down. Dad Harker let them in. With a broken sob, Margaret was in Rusty's arms. Ma Harker and one of the Ellison boys took Poe under their care. Poe, by some miracle, had escaped serious injury. But before Poe let them attend to him, he helped two cowboys put Jude's dead body in a back room. For perhaps five minutes Poe Parsons was alone with the dead body of the man who had always hated him. Swiftly Poe searched the dead man's pocket[s] [t]he thick roll [o]f yellow-backed [b]ad bee[n] [p]erhaps bulged [i]n [p]ocket.

Back in th[e] [f]ront roo[m] [w]he[n] Rusty to bring in [J]ed [a]nd Luke Qu[i]n[n], who were am[o]ng the p[o]sers that the cowboys had [h]erded into [t]he bunkhouse. [J]ed Luke, each with [a] lamp on his b[e]d[i]de by Rusty's gun[s] were brought [in]. Poe opened the door [t]hat led into th[e] [l]ast room where lay the [d]ead Jude. Ne[i]ther of the sons showed [a]ny visible signs [o]f grief. Jude had be[e]n a hard father.

"The king is dead," Poe told the two brothers. "He was the only real man that wore the Quillan name. He won't be here to back your plays any more. And without him, your scurvy lives aren't worth a plugged dime. Apache Basin, in fact the State of Arizona, is too small to hold the three sons of Jude Quillan. You're selling out. Here's the money that buys all the Quillan holdings. You have one week in which to move out every sheep you own. Any woolie left in the Basin after one week from today will be shot. The same medicine goes for the Quillan men. Dad Harker, you and Frank Ellison will draw up the bill of sale for the Quillans to sign." Poe turned to Ma Harker with a quick smile.

"Now, if you'll just stake me to a roll of tape and some bandages, I'll patch up those nicked ribs. Then I'll be on my way."

The Quillan brothers were glad enough to sell for any price. They knew full well that with their father dead, their lives were in grave danger, here in Apache Basin. They feared the power of Poe Parsons.

Rusty helped bandage Poe's ribs. "Where yuh ridin', Poe?"

Poe Parsons smiled thinly. "Come with me and see, Rusty."

Something in Poe's tone and the expression on his face told the red-haired cowboy that Poe's ride was something of great importance.

"I'll be with yuh, Poe," he said quietly.

XIV

THE rustling of the leaves, men called it. That word of mouth passing of news. It had told Poe Parsons that Mona Quillan was at the cabin of Bob Harlan.

That [illegible] news, carried by a Quillan spy, hau[illegible]nt for the ears o[illegible]ude Quillan o[illegible]e had inter[illegible]an there [illegible] had ch[illegible] that bit o. news o[illegible]f the [illegible]n, th[illegible] him, badly scared, with instruc[illegible] to ride [illegible]nd keep rh[illegible] the Apache basin was [illegible] behi[illegible].

As [illegible]nd Rusty ro[illegible] toward the Bob Harla[illegible] Poe was w[illegible]ped in a black, broodin[illegible]ence. A sile[illegible]e that Rusty had not [illegible]termerity to bre[illegible].

Poe also knew that Rusty could not guess. Namely, that Wes Quillan had been sent, with three men, to kill Bob Harlan.

It was mid-afternoon when they neared Bob Harlan's little ranch. Poe pulled up and Rusty followed suit. Poe spoke for the first time since they had left the Ellison ranch. His face was drawn, grim lipped, tight jawed. His black eyes looked red in the sunlight. When he spoke his voice was brittle, rasping.

"I go on alone from here. You stay here where you are."

There was no sign of life at the Harlan place. No smoke came from the chimney. No sound broke the stillness. The place seemed deserted. Something in Poe's manner chilled the blood of the red-haired cowboy. He nodded, without speaking. Poe's manner forbade questioning. He let Poe ride alone across the clearing to the closed door of Bob Harlan's cabin.

Now, even as Poe was swinging out of the saddle, there sounded the crack of a rifle. A puff of thin, white smoke from a patch of brush. The figure of a man crouched there. Rusty's carbine cracked and the crouching man sprawled forward on his face. Rusty saw Poe cling for a moment to the horn of his saddle. Poe looked back across his shoulder and Rusty saw his white teeth bared in what might have been a smile.

Now the cabin door swung open and Poe walked inside. The door closed again. Rusty frowned, trying to puzzle out the situation. He quit his horse and made his way on foot to where the man he had shot lay motionless. His aim had been accurate. Wes Quillan lay on his side, shot through the heart.

No sound from the cabin. Again that tomb-like stillness. Rusty, puzzled, uneasy, waited impatiently, watching the cabin.

Inside the cabin Poe Parsons faced Bob Harlan and Mona Quillan. Mona, fully clothed, sitting on the edge of Bob's bunk. Bob Harlan, an ugly wound across his cheek, his eyes bloodshot and hard, his mouth a lipless slit. The floor of the cabin was littered wth empty shells.

Poe ignored Bob. He stood there, his back against the door. There was a bullet hole in his white Stetson and from under the sweatband a trickle of blood was staining his cheek.

"THE war in Apache Basin," he said in a toneless voice, "is over. Jude Quillan is dead. The bushwhacking Wes just departed from this life. Zeb and Luke have sold out and are quitting the country, and they will take their mother along with 'em."

Poe lit one of his gold tipped Mexican cigarets. His hands shook a little as he cupped the match flame.

"You always cared a lot for Bob Harlan, Mona. But I never believed that you would come to him like this."

"Look here, Parsons," said Bob. "She . . ."

"I'll talk to you later, Harlan. Right now, I'm talking to Mona. I'd prefer to be alone with her."

Bob looked at the girl. Mona nodded. Bob stepped outside and closed the door upon Poe and the woman he loved.

"You used to tell me that you cared for Bob Harlan, Mona. But I always thought you were just trying to make me jealous. I heard you were at his cabin."

"I knew you'd come," Mona said quietly. "I told Bob that you'd come. He's not afraid of you, Poe. If he had been afraid, he'd have killed you when you rode up. Bob Harlan is a man. A real man."

"He aims to marry you?"

"He asked me to marry him, yes."

"You'd be happy living on a ranch, cooking and washing and slaving?"

"I'd be happy anywhere, doing anything, with the man I loved."

Poe nodded. "When I heard you were here at Bob Harlan's cabin, I rode here to kill him. You are the only woman on earth, Mona, that I ever wanted. My love for you has been the one decent thing in my life. I'm leaving Apache Basin for good. I'm going to the Argentine where

I already own a ranch. I'm camping on the rim tonight for the last time. Then I ride on, alone, to a new life in a new country. This is good-bye for you and for me, Mona."

Poe walked over to where she sat. He was smiling a little.

"I told you, Mona, that Jude Quillan was dead. I killed him in a fair fight." Mona nodded, dry eyed, her face white, drawn with pain. "Yes, Poe. I knew that some day you would kill him unless he killed you."

She got to her feet.

They stood there, facing one another. Then, without a word, Poe Parsons turned quickly and walked to the door. He opened the door, passed outside, and closed the door behind him. Mona Quillan, trembling, swaying dizzily, caught the edge of the bunk for support. Now she was kneeling beside the bunk, her bloodless lips moving in prayer. It was a prayer of her own making, a prayer that came from the innermost heart of this girl whose whole world had been ripped into bloody shreds. And as she prayed she waited for the crash of shots that would mean another red tragedy in her life that had been so drained of happiness.

HER seconds seemed eternity. Still no sound of gunfire. Now the door opened softly and Bob Harlan came into the cabin. As his hand touched her bowed head, Mona gave a stifled little cry.

"Poe has gone, Mona. Gone for keeps. I expected a gun fight, but instead, he shook hands and wished us happiness. Then he rode away. He stopped for a few minutes to talk to Rusty, then he rode away. Rusty is at the barn."

"Poe shook hands with you, Bob?"

"And wished us happiness and good luck, honey."

With a broken sob, Mona crumpled in a pitiful little heap. She pushed Bob away and he knew that she wished to be alone. So he left her there in the cabin and joined Rusty at the stable.

AROUND white moon rode the sky above the rim. By a small campfire, Poe Parsons sat, his head bandaged, a cold cigaret between his lips. His [illegible] longer ha[illegible]tared into the fi[illegible]ze of [illegible]oney, [illegible]mpfire tha[illegible] his last here on th[illegible]n. The [illegible]d, [illegible] lines were gone [illegible]om [illegible] fa[illegible] He w[illegible]hink-ing of [illegible] girl he [illegible] left behind. The girl [illegible]t he had gi[illegible] into the ker[illegible] anotner man. Th[illegible] had taken mo[illegible]-age than Poe kn[illegible] he possesse[illegible]

Now his quic[illegible] trained sen[illegible] him that someone w[illegible]s coming. He [illegible]rd the crunch of roc[illegible] under shod hoc[illegible]. Poe's first instinct [illegible]as to quit the fi[illegible]ight and hide in the shadows. Then he smiled crookedly and remained as he was. What difference did it make now, if some enemy took a pot shot at him? What had he left to fight for? He lit a fresh cigaret and did not even look up when the rider pulled up just beyond the rim of the firelight and dismounted. Now the rider was appoaching on foot, but still Poe stared into the fire. He heard the tingle of spurs.

"Poe!"

Poe Parsons was on his feet in an instant. There, across the campfire, smiling a little, stood Mona Quillan.

"Mona!" he cried huskily. "Why are you here?"

"I told you long ago, Poe, that if ever I made up my mind that I loved you, I would come up to the rim to you. I'm here, Poe. I'm going with you, wherever you go. Nothing but death will ever again separate us."

"But how about Bob Harlan?"

Mona smiled. "I didn't know my own mind, Poe, until I knew that you had ridden out of my life forever. Then I knew that there could never be any other man but you in my life. I told Bob. He understands. Poe Parsons, are you going to stand there like a statue of dumbness?"

Poe leaped over the campfire. His arms were around the girl he loved. His lips found hers. And though they were both tired and both suffering from bullet wounds, they sat, there by the fire, until dawn streaked the sky. A breakfast of bacon and biscuits and black coffee. Then they rode away from the rim, their stirrups touching. Into a new dawn, into a new life that lay on the other side of the skyline.

Save several cents a pack! Try Avalon Cigarettes! Cellophane wrap. Union made.

SATAN'S SEGUNDO

By BUCK STRADLEIGH

Saddle pards. . . . Side by side they faced the threat of outlaw lead! One fought to win the girl he loved. The other played a double game—baiting a death-trap for his partner with jealous, murder-masked guns!

THE moment that Steve Peters had waited half the night for had come. Eyes straining into the darkness, he jerked the six-shooter out of his holster and squeezed back tighter against the wall of the corral.

An instant before he had heard the scrape of bars from the other side of the pole fence and the clatter of hoofs as a horse was turned into the pen. Now the yellow light of the low moon showed a figure turning the corner and gliding toward him.

Steve waited until the soundlessly creeping figure was six feet from him and then jumped forward, out of the shadow.

"Y'u, there—who is it?" he snapped.

An oath like the hiss of a cat snarled

out of the dark. Quick as a flash the man hurled the heavy Mex saddle that he was carrying straight at Steve's face.

As the dark figure moved, Peters jammed trigger. The bullet slammed home in the thick of the saddle horn. The same split second, the flying mass of horse gear took him in the stomach, knocking him backward against the fence.

Peters heard the swish of air and then a vicious thud as a knife flicked a patch of hide from his face and then slammed home in the corral bar at his back. He saw the dark form whirl and go scooting out of sight.

Peters kicked his spurs loose from the saddle trappings around his feet and went tearing after him. By leaps and bounds his long legs overhauled the spider-like figure that went stampeding frenziedly toward the open. An instant more and Peters flung himself forward in a last flying leap. His hand swept out and crashed down on the shoulder of the racing man.

As the fugitive tripped and went down, Peters threw himself on top of him.

"So y'u would drive a knife at me, would y'u, y'u lousy greaser?" he gritted as he clouted the snarling, wild-eyed and swarthy-skinned face from side to side with stinging wallops. "What's yore game, anyhow, Tony Guerra, sneakin' outa the bunk house at midnight an' comin' back three-four hours afterward? I heard y'u when y'u went crawlin' past my bunk like uh doggone snake. I been out here waitin' ever since. Where y'u been an' what y'u been doin', huh?"

"I weel tell you eet ees none of your damn business, greengo," the Mexican panted, twisting and writhing like a cat under Steve's grip. His eyes rolled to the whites, a line of foam edged his crookedly straining lips. "I weel keel you for thees. I weel cut your heart out—"

"Damn if I hadn't oughta wring yore yeller neck then while I got the chance," Peters observed thoughtfully as he gripped his fingers tighter in the man's oily throat. "Y'u savvy any prayers y'u wanta say before I start squeezin', huh?"

FOR an instant, a battle between bloodthirsty fury and craven terror waged in the greaser's shifty black-button eyes.

"When I throw the knife, I do not know who you are, Peters," he growled [illegible] last. "You come [illegible]eek in the dark an' [illegible]are me. [illegible]cenk Tony [illegible]u if [illegible]e knows wh[illegible]ou are, [illegible]

"Quicker'n [illegible] will [illegible]p u[illegible]use, if y'u reck[illegible]ed y'u c[illegible]le salivate m[illegible]ithout get[illegible] ketched," Peters replied [illegible] "Spit it out, now- [illegible]here y'u be [illegible] night?"

"I wake up in t[illegible] night and I [illegible]k," the Mexican wh[illegible]ed. "I hav[illegible] oeeg pain in my stor[illegible]ch. I get [illegible]o for a ride 'til I fe[illegible] better."

"First time I ever heard tell of [illegible]h hossback ridin' cure fer uh belly ache," Peters grunted ironically. He shoved up to his feet, collaring the Mexican as he rose and jerking him up in front of him.

"Git back to the bunk now and stay there," he grunted as he planted a hefty kick in the rear of the greaser's anatomy. "Y'u ain't only uh liar, yo're the damn clumsiest one I've saw in uh year."

Peters did not go back to the shack. As the Mexican's figure faded into the gloom, he stood leaning against the corral fence, pensively rolling a cigarette, a strain of anxious perplexity drawing his face in worried lines.

PETERS had lived on the Running-S with Ed Meekers and his wife for five years. He was an orphan of fourteen when he came, and things were prosperous. But the wife died, leaving a thirteen-year-old daughter, and Meekers lost his grip. The ranch began to run down. At last, with more than a thousand dollars due in back taxes and a bank mortgage, the crash loomed close ahead.

Steele Cronin was the thirty-year-old son of Jud Cronin, owner of the big Z-Bar-T outfit forty miles to the north. Steele had come to Meekers, saying that he had some cash to invest and was willing to pay off all the money owing on two conditions. First, a fifty-fifty partnership in the business. Second, a mortgage on Meekers' half, to be discharged providing Meekers repaid the four thousand dollars inside of three months.

It was a hard trade—a bargain that was just like Steele Cronin. Tall, lean, thin-lipped, tough and wiry as spring steel, eyes dazzlingly blue as knife points and cold as icicles, mouth a straight white slit like the

jaw[illegible] trap—in all ways Jud Cronin's son[illegible] to his name.

[illegible]n in Cronin's [illegible] was that [illegible]come for[illegible]ian of the Running *and b[illegible]oreman[illegible]*ary Meekers now was eighteen[illegible] lovely [illegible]a prairie ro[illegible] For months, [illegible] and Steve [illegible]d uno[illegible]d one another without a word having [illegible]spoken. Cron[illegible] knew it, and hated the [illegible] with savage jealous fury.

As [illegible]r drew on, Meekers figured that at [illegible]fo[illegible]ee hundred teers would be in shape for sale at the fall roundup. But at market prices, his half of the money would not be enough to pay off Cronin and clear up his title to half of the ranch. The old man was in despair and Cronin openly gloating.

And then Peters, scouting around the country, had picked up a chance to sell the entire bunch of cattle to a big construction camp at El Soluran, forty miles southwest on the border. The purchasing agent would pay better than Meekers had ever dreamed of getting at Omaha, providing delivery was made at the camp in three days.

And then came Tony Guerra's midnight expedition. Sly and treacherous as a snake Peters knew the man to be. Dirty work of some kind was on foot, and Guerra was at the bottom of it.

"TODAY'S the big drive, boys!"

Two hours later, a tall, yellow-haired youth spluttered the above words through a sea-foam of water and soap as he splashed his face into the wash basin in the bunk house of the Running-S.

"Wonder if them rustlers down by Snake canyon will undertake to drop uh loop over us when we swing down by the line?"

"Ask Guerra—he'll tell y'u."

Hands half up to his face, Bud Martin swung around in astonishment toward where Peters stood in the doorway.

"Huh? Tony will tell me?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Shore. He was out galivantin' around half uh the night and won't tell where he done went," Peters said.

"Oh, he was, was he?" Martin grunted back. "Most prob-ly he was wranglin' uh look-see on the chances uh cuttin' out half uh hundred uh our steers and drivin' 'em over the line, the lousy crook."

"You lie!" Guerra's swarthy face jerked into a spasm of fury as the words screeched from his lips. "I do not rustle any steers—"

Martin swung around from the wash bench, basin in hand. The next instant, Guerra got the full load of soapy water full in the face. Driving behind it, Martin's fist crashed into his jaw, sending him spinning head over heels into a corner.

Guerra bounced to his feet in a rage. His hand darted to the hilt of the knife in his belt. Three more Mexicans besides him were on the pay roll of the Running-S. Out of the tail of his eye, Martin saw blades glinting in both corners of the room behind him.

Martin cast a swift glance around. His gun was ten feet away, in the holster hanging over the foot of his bunk. Guerra was just starting his rush—

From the open doorway behind the Mexican, where Peters stood, a cold blue length of steel in each hand, his voice snapped like a cracking whip.

"Bury them knives, greasers, or the buzzards down thisaway will shore as hell reckon it's Thanksgiving," he ordered curtly. "And y'u, Guerra, the next time y'u call uh white man uh liar, get ready to chaw grit, savvy?"

Snarling and sullen, the Mexicans put up their knives. A moment later, the cook's breakfast yell came from the door of the cook house.

AS the cowboys drifted out of the bunk house on the way to eat, the door of the ranch house swung open. Cronin and Ed Meekers stepped out and started down toward the bunch of cowboys. Mary Meekers walked at her father's side, her face anxiously drawn and pale. An expression of pain was visible on Cronin's countenance above the big bandage that covered his chin.

"Rotten tooth," he mumbled thickly as he came up. "Up on the prod all night with it. I couldn't fork uh hoss no more than I can fly. Y'u'll have to take the drive down, Peters. I reckon y'u've rode over the border tuh see that Mex girl at Chiquita times enough tuh savvy the way. Start now, water at Snake canyon and bed down there for the night. That'll give y'u less'n twenty miles more to make tomorrer

afore sunset. There'll be uh check to my order for eight thousand dollars tuh bring back. Try tuh clear off into Mexico with it, and I'll chase y'u tuh hell and back, savvy?"

"When y'u say I know uh girl in Chiquita, y'u lie, Cronin, and y'u know it," Peters said coldly. "I'm ready tuh wrangle the drive if y'u say so. But y'u savvy as well as I do that rustlers are thicker'n ticks on uh sheep's ear down there by the border. I got reason to suspicion there's one of 'em herdin' right here in this outfit. Yore runnin' big chances uh seein' yore eight thousand dollars go stampedin' down into greaser land an' outa sight permanent if y'u send them steers out on the trail today."

"Do y'u reckon I'd have y'u wrangle this drive if there was any danger uh losin' it, y'u fool?" Cronin sneered back. "Yo're yeller, that's what's the matter with y'u. Mebbeso I kin get one uh these greasers tuh wrangle the job—"

Peters' hand dropped to his gun. His granite gray eyes had suddenly pinched to glittering knife-slits.

"If y'u reckon I'm gun-shy, haul out yore iron and we'll settle it here an' now, Cronin," he snapped.

A shadow of ashy pallor grayed Cronin's cheeks above the white folds of the bandage.

"Hold on, there, Peters—I was only foolin'," he exclaimed hastily. "Course I savvy y'u ain't gun-shy none. There's cow thieves workin', but they're way down Matanzas way—a hundred mile from anywheres y'u'll go. Bud Martin'll ride with y'u, and the four Mexicans here. That oughta be plenty to take care of anything, no matter what happens. Will y'u go, Peters?"

"Shore. I'll go, if y'u say so," Peters nodded. "We'll pull right after breakfast."

THE sun was within an hour of setting. Spread out in a dusty column several hundred yards long, the steers drifted out of the mouth of a dry wash into a grass-bottomed basin a mile or more wide. In the middle of the flat, a spring of water bubbled up under the foot of a tree and trickled down to collect in a pool at the foot of the gentle slope. Bawling and snorting, the cattle picked up the scent of the water and went stampeding ahead on t[illegible]lop.

The six ri[illegible]s sat around, wat[illegible]ile the t[illegible] animals drank.

[illegible]resently, T[illegible] Guerra [illegible]ing in Spanish. [illegible] other [illegible]ans spurred ah[illegible]d and started driving th[illegible]eers away [illegible]m the po[illegible] hazing ther[illegible]t toward the middle [illegible] the open flat.

"Here. What [illegible]-all aimin' [illegible]?" Peters shouted ov[illegible] the bawling [illegible]lattering of hoofs.

"We drive [illegible]m over [illegible]re [illegible] bed down," Guer[illegible] spat through h[illegible] teeth. "Cronin have say we stay here [illegible] night, don't he?"

"I disremember whether he did or not," Peters replied curtly, locking eyes with the greaser. "Anyhow, we ain't goin' to. We're travelin' ahead uh spell further afore we stop."

"Don't make me laugh, greengo. I have sore face," Guerra sneered back. A cackle of derisive chucklings ran down the line of the other three Mexicans. Curtly oblivious of Peters, Guerra and his three countrymen went on spreading around the cattle and urging them away from the trail.

Peters' hand moved and the snout of his six-shooter glinted in the rays of the setting sun. The gun roared. The foremost of the Mexicans yelled out a curse and jerked his horse back on its heels as a bullet ripped through the crown of his hat.

Guerra snarled an unprintable oath and dropped his hand toward his belt. The hand froze half way and then wavered back to the saddle horn as Bud Martin's gun flipped out, covering him.

Guerra's face knotted in purple zigzags. His eyes rolled to the whites.

"When Cronin hears about thees," he started to yell, his voice stifled and choked with fury.

"Cronin be damned," Peters cut back. "I'm the one yore wranglin' business with tuhnight. Swing around, y'u coyotes, an' git them steers up ahead on that trail. And here's another thing," he added meaningly. "From now on, y'u four beauties travel in front uh me and Martin, all the time, savvy? First move one uh y'u makes to act funny, there'll be uh spare hoss in this outfit. Snap into it now—*pronto.*"

Black-faced with fury, the four Mexicans jerked their ponies around. Two on either side of the line, with Steve and Mar-

tin f[illegible]ing behind, they started whoop-in[illegible]rilling cattle into [illegible]tion again.

It [illegible]g dark [illegible]. Steve knew the m[illegible] would ri[illegible] shortly after sun[illegible]. He had already dec[illegible]d on the sp[illegible]here he wo[illegible] bed down [illegible]r the n[illegible]a basin-like v[illegible]ey some five or six mi[illegible]rther on, w[illegible] unscalable ridge wal[illegible] two sides [illegible]d entrances only throu[illegible]ow passes [illegible] either end.

The [illegible]n [illegible]ped behin[illegible]he horizon and darkne[illegible]came. In half an [illegible]our more, the moon s[illegible]ved its hot copper disc over the ridge summits, showing the four greasers still holding their places alongside the herd.

It was close to nine o'clock by Steve's watch when the black buttresses of the hills surrounding the valley loomed up ahead. A quarter of an hour later, the drive was streaming through the knife-gash passage between thousand-foot walls into the tight little enclosure.

"Now listen tuh me, y'u four," Steve announced as he rode up to the Mexicans, gun snout shimmering over his saddle horn. "Here's where we bed down. Furthermore, we're goin' tuh ride one hell of uh tight night guard over this bunch uh steers, savvy? There'll be one man at each end of the valley, where the passes come through the hills. Y'u, Sanchez, and Romero, take the first watch. Martinez and Guerra will sleep till two uh clock and then swap with y'u. Me an' Martin will ride guard on the herd inside here. Martin will take the first watch and I'll ride the second. And get this. Y'u sidewindin' coyotes undertake tuh throw over anything crooked, and y'u'll wake up in hell. All right. Feed up and then amble where y'u belong."

Beyond an assortment of muttering curses, there was no dispute. In two groups, the six men ate briefly of the lunches in their saddle bags and boiled coffee. Sanchez and Romero rode off to their stations at the ends of the valley. Guerra and Martinez spread their blankets on the grass in the shadow of a pinon tree a few rods back from the camp fire.

Martin swung into his saddle and started drifting slowly around the outskirts of the bedded herd. With his saddle for a pillow, Peters spread his bed roll in a patch of darkness at the foot of another tree. From here, himself under cover, he had an open view across the fifty yards to the two Mexicans.

An hour or so dragged away. To all appearances, Guerra and Martinez were fast asleep.

Inch by inch, so stealthily that a man a hundred feet away would have heard and seen nothing. Peters wormed out of his bed roll. Flat on his stomach, he humped the blanket up in a long mound, simulating the shape of a slumbering form. Still glued to the ground, he crept back into the shadows that lay inky black behind the trunk of the pinon.

MORE time lagged past. Clouds rolled up from the west and started drifting over the moon. Peters' eyes stung and smarted with the strain of watching through the blotted mingling of light and shadow.

Suddenly he stiffened and rubbed his eyes. Up through the carpetry of light and darkness that mottled the ground, two figures were worming their way, flat on their stomachs. By the glinting of moonlight from the silver ornaments on the belt of the one in front, Peters recognized Tony Guerra.

Soundless as gliding snakes, the two black shadows drew nearer Peters' blanket roll. A yard from the heap of bedding, Guerra halted and pushed up to his knees. His arm swung aloft. High over his head the ten-inch knife blade shimmered an instant before it shot down with all the savage force of the man's shoulder behind it.

A snarl of rage spat through Guerra's teeth as the blanket caved in under the thrust and the knife point sank into the ground. He tugged it loose and spun on his heels as the other man shoved close to him, muttering under his breath.

Peters did not hear what Martinez said. As he gripped the butt of his six-shooter and started to swing it up to cover the men, Guerra's knife point shot out again like a rattler's strike.

Square in the throat under the stubble-bearded swarthy chin the blade took Martinez. The man gurgled a slobbering cough and slumped forward onto his face.

"Grab sky, y'u dog—"

Guerra had just tugged the knife free from Martinez' throat. As Peters spoke, he whipped around quick as a jumping cat.

His arm flashed out and the knife shot through the air.

Peters fired the split-second after he threw. The whizzing blade ripped through his coat sleeve, slicing a six-inch ribbon of flesh from his arm and spoiling his aim.

The bullet drilled Guerra's shoulder instead of his heart. Before Peters could steady the gun enough to fire again, he had jumped sidewise a clean ten feet into the black mass of the tree shadow. His moccasined feet made no sound for Peters to aim by as he sprinted away in the darkness.

Muttering disgust at his clumsiness, Peters pulled up his shirt sleeve and bandaged his handkerchief around the bleeding gash in his arm. As he worked, he was thinking fast.

FROM half a mile away, a rifle shot shattered the midnight hush. Hard on its heels, an answering one whip-cracked a medley of splintering echoes against the rock walls of the gulch. Then silence. Silence broken after an instant by the pulsing roar of galloping hoofs.

Rapidly the hoof beats swelled into a drumfire that rolled a resonant diapason of sound up the deep cleft of the valley floor. An instant later, a figure on horse back shot out of the shadows and came tearing across the moonlighted open.

It was Bud Martin. Peters ran out to him, waved his arms.

"Bud, what was that shot?" he exclaimed "Did Romero try to get y'u?"

Martin hauled up his horse at Peters side in a clattering of hoofs and flying turf.

"He did—and I drilled the varmint," he exclaimed, out of breath. "But there's more than that. Y'u was right, all the way, Steve—"

The words died on Martin's lips.

From somewhere back in the ring of yellow-white tombstone flanks of the boulders along the base of the valley wall, the barking roar of a heavy caliber rifle thundered out. Martin threw up his arms and pitched forward out of the saddle.

Peters caught him as he came down and eased him off the mustang and onto the ground. On his knees he bent over him, madly ripping the woolen shirt apart down his back.

Peters stooped and put his ear to the white skin over the ragged widening splotch of brown. His face in the moonlight was a mask of fury to see as he pushed back the man and staggered to his feet.

FROM the foot of the tree, a spot of shadows were zigzagging toward the rock rim at the base of the valley wall whence came the shots. Cursing in his fingers, Peters ran lithely, lamented, careless of the uproar he made crashing through underbrush.

Twice, as he raced across patches of open ground between shadows, the six-shooter boomed out again. Once Peters felt the jerk of his hat brim as the slug half lifted the headpiece. The second time, a streak of liquid fire seared over his shoulder. He gritted a curse between his teeth and plunged ahead.

At the edge of a twenty-foot wide ribbon of moonlighted open, Peters stopped. Ten yards ahead was the spectral gray boulder flank behind which the murderer crouched. Not even in the red whirl of fury that flooded his brain was Peters reckless enough to stampede out into that dazzling white streak of deadly radiance.

AS he stood, breathing hard and trying to see around the corner of the big rock, the drumfire of galloping hoofs rumbled out from a quarter of a mile up the valley bottom again. Mingled with the hoof beats were shouting voices and the crackling bark of guns fired in air. Tony Guerra's rustling pals had come. They were at work prodding the sleeping cattle up onto their feet.

From behind the boulder, Peters heard a rasping oath and the sudden clattering of feet. Quick as a sprinter at the crack of the gun, he hurled himself out of the shadow and across the open space.

A scant two seconds it took him to cover the forty feet to the base of the rock. As he swung around the corner into a little clearing he saw the shape of a man just dashing out of sight into the underbrush on the other side on the dead run.

Peters fired at the vanishing form and muttered an oath. The bullet had spanged from a rock and gone screaming mockingly into space. The sound of the feet

gritting [illegible] the rocks faded out in the uproar [illegible]s, shots and pounding hoofs from [illegible].

Wh[illegible]nd, Peter[illegible] started to shove [illegible]gh the b[illegible]sh, back to the ope[illegible] He took a couple of [illegible]ps and halted [illegible]ain, straining his eyes up [illegible]ard the fa[illegible]d of the valley.

Th[illegible]undred yards away, on the rim o[illegible]en ground [illegible]ere the boulders sca[illegible]he edge of [illegible] flat, a figure burst out [illegible]ver, swun[illegible] into the saddle of a h[illegible]en and waiting h[illegible]e and went roweling [illegible]y on a wild galle[illegible]. Peters' face was gr[illegible]dy white and set in the moonlight as he w[illegible]irled around and went scrambling the rest of the way out of the boulder pocket and across the open toward Bud Martin's horse.

The animal was still standing pretty nearly where Martin had dropped from his back. Peters swept up Bud's carbine from the ground and forked leather in a jump without touching stirrups. He hauled the black gelding around on his heels, headed up valley, and drove in his spurs.

Down on the flat, most of the steers were up on their feet by now and commencing to snort and mill around excitedly. In their rush to get the animals up and started off in a hurry, the rustlers had worked too fast. Cattle at night are nervous as cats. A little more noise and confusion and the raiders would have a full-grown stampede on their hands.

Crouched low in the saddle, Peters sent the sure-footed little cow pony tearing along, pointing not toward the center of the milling bunch, but off on the outskirts, close under the beetling wall of the valley side, where the man he had seen run out of the rocks had been heading for when he disappeared.

NECK stretched out level, mane whipping back into Peters' eyes, the gallant little horse was traveling like the wind. He was outrunning the stampede now. Rapidly the thundering torrent of frenzied beef on Peters' left grew thinner. Up ahead, at the gap in the walls, he could see a thin double column of cattle pouring through to the outside.

Ten yards to one side of the gap, Peters jerked the black gelding down to a hoof-clattering stop. As fast as he could work the lever of his carbine, he poured shot after shot into the whirlpool of thundering black shapes.

The first half dozen of the steers that he dropped in the narrow space between the walls plugged the opening solid. The others, finding the way closed to them as they charged up, swung around and commenced to circle back along the valley walls, bawling in terror-shrill snorts.

Out of the shadows under the flank of the cliff, a horse and rider loomed into sight. The rustler's gun was spurting flame in stuttering jerks.

Peters' last shot had emptied his carbine. He dropped it and whipped out his shooter, jerking the mustang up onto his heels as he drew, so as to get the cover of the horse's neck between him and the stranger.

Peters saw the rustler's body slump limp and cave down over the saddle horn as the guns roared together. He felt his pony lunge underneath him as a slug tore through the animal's lungs.

A flame of agony went through Peters' chest. He pitched out of the saddle, went spinning through space and crashed down hard on his head on the rocky ground.

Through Peters' reeling senses came the throbbing tattoo of galloping hoofs. A hundred yards away, two other riders came stampeding up through the scattering steers, their guns vomiting flame.

Ten feet behind Peters, the pile of dead cattle bulked a jet black bulwark in the cliff shadows. On hands and knees, he spun around and hurdled the first line of carcasses.

Crouched behind the heap, he shoved his six-shooter out over the rump of a thousand-pound steer. The roars of the three guns crashed into one. Peters saw one of the bandits throw up his arms and slump sidewise out of his saddle, foot locked in the stirrup. He fired again and snarled grim triumph through his bleeding lips as the second man let out a howl of pain and reined his horse around on his heels.

Peters heard a hiss of escaping breath from up above him and jerked his eyes aloft. The moonlight shone on the snarling face and beadily glittering eyes of Tony Guerra, swarming down over the dead steers, his knife arm whirling aloft as he charged.

With no split second of time to swing up his gun, Peters jerked himself sidewise. The greaser's knife-arm shot down like a swinging scythe. The blade slit Peters' shirt sleeve and sliced his arm from shoulder to elbow.

Before Guerra could get his balance back to strike again. Peters' fist shot out, driving with crushing force into his chin. As Guerra stumbled backward, off balance, Peters' hand gripped the knife arm and cramped it up and backward over his head.

With his heel crooked behind Guerra's leg, Peters tripped the Mex and sent him crashing down on his back. As he fell, Peters followed him, dropping with all his weight behind both knees in the killer's stomach.

Deeper and deeper Peters kneaded his fingers into the snaky brown gullet under the grinning jaws and belched-out tongue. How long he crouched there, whistling berserk curses of triumph between his teeth before sanity returned, he did not know. At last he loosened his grip and bent to put his ear to Guerra's heart. The man had been dead a long time, already.

"AND so after that, I hung around and waited till sunup and then rounded up what was left of the steers and wrangled 'em down to the camp. My shoulder wasn't hurt as bad as I reckoned it was at first. I tied it up with a piece of Guerra's shirt and got along all right. There wasn't only two hundred and sixty steers when I got 'em down to El Soluran—the rest was lost in the stampede. So the check is seven thousand dollars instead of eight."

Steele Cronin, his jaw still swathed in bandages, stood staring in blank amazement at the dust and blood-covered, haggard-eyed cowboy who sat slumped down in a chair in the kitchen of the Running-S ranch house, a pink slip of paper in his hand. Ed Meekers' faded blue eyes were glittering with pent-up fires of rage. Mary's face was white and horror-tense with the story that Peters had just told.

"Seven thousand, huh. Thirty-five hundred for Meekers and me, then, each of us," Cronin grunted at last. "Won't quite round up to enough to pay back what y'u owe me, will it, Ed? Hand that check over here, Peters."

Coolly, Peters folded the ch[illegible] up and tucked it into his vest pocket.

"[illegible]at would y'u do w[illegible] had [illegible], Cronin—if jail?" he [illegible]ly. "I had 'em m[illegible]e it out [illegible]s, any how."

"[illegible]—in jail! What d'yuh m[illegible], y'u fool?" Cronin yelled. "It was m[illegible]oney, not Meekers' [illegible]"

Peters felt [illegible] his pocket [illegible]ld up something tha[illegible] glinted steel[illegible] in the sunlight. C[illegible]in snarle[illegible] oath and his face we[illegible] putty-hued.

"The sp[illegible]r that's missin' fr[illegible] yore off boot, there, Cronin," Peters' [illegible]ice gritted through the sudden hush. Y'u put up Guerra and the other greasers to kill me and Bud and steal the herd. But y'u couldn't trust 'em to wrangle the job alone. Y'u had to sneak outa here after dark and ride after us tuh see that everything went right. It was y'u that hid behind that rock and gunned down Bud Martin in the back. Then when Guerra's rustlers showed up, y'u went high-tailin' off down to see what was happenin'. When the shootin' commenced, y'u got cold feet an' lit out fer home. Y'u didn't have only jest enough time to get back here afore sunup, anyhow—

A snarl like the growl of a cornered dog boiled through Cronin's crookedly jerking lips. His hand flashed down to his belt.

The iron was still half in the holster when Peters' revolver thundered ear-splitting echoes in the low-ceilinged little room. Cronin took a step forward, folded up at the knees and sagged down onto his face.

"THE ranch had been needin' uh new manager fer uh long time, anyhow, and now if y'u'll only stay here an' do it, I reckon everything will be all right," Ed Meekers' husky old voice droned as he sat pensively drawing his pipe on the back steps of the ranch house at sundown that day. "Yore aimin' tuh keep on ridin' along with us, ain't y'u, Steve?"

"Not without I can manage everything there is here, cows *and* folks included," Peters grinned back, as he looked sidewise at Mary.

"That part will be the easiest of all, Steve," Mary whispered back as she slipped her hand into his.

GUN-ROOM FOR A HOLSTER HOPPER

By JAMES P. OLSEN

Twenty-four hours to hit the sundown trail: Only that pint-sized waddie wasn't side-stepping a defi, even though it was scribbled in Boothill script.

"I AIN'T bettin' into no skinned deck!" Sharp, cutting, the accusing voice rang over the packed room. Drinks, half-way to dry lips, stopped. At one table, a Mexican herder held a card poised in mid-air as he dealt. All eyes turned toward a table in the corner of the room, where a tall, browned young man, hands

flat on the top of the table, stared across at a mountainous man opposite him.

Tie cutters, a few punchers, sheep herders—not a one moved. Death lurked in the smoke-laden air. A man had called Turkey Thomas. And all evening long, men had been ignoring or staying out of his way. Lord of those New Mexico mountains, Turkey Thomas was in an evil temper. That day, a thousand head of his best sheep had followed a silly leader over a steep bluff.

Turkey's flat, red, featureless face quivered and puffed with rage. Then, like a flash, he moved. Men would not have thought it possible that a man of his great, hulking size could have moved so fast—men that did not know him.

A gun appeared in his hand as if wished there. Even as the tall young man dug for the gun in the waistband of his corduroy pants, Turkey could have shot him. But that would have been losing great odds. And, fast as he was—no man in the mountains could sling hardware quicker than he—Turkey wanted more odds.

As if he were handling a toy thing of a child's playhouse, Turkey gripped the table and flung it against the man who had dared call him. Table and man went down in a crashing heap. As he scrambled erect, gun still not drawn, three shots roared out. The young fellow's body twitched oddly and he lay still amid the wreckage.

Not until then did men notice the young fellow who had been the third member at the table. Short, stocky, unassuming, he was easy to overlook. He sat there in his chair while the almost instant drama of death was enacted before his eyes. Then, he moved.

Like an unleashed volcano, the red head sprang to his feet. Blindly, cursing, whimpering madly, he charged Turkey Thomas—a bantam charging in to do battle with a giant Shanghai. Surprised, Turkey lost ground.

A hard fist, with all of Brick's hundred and forty pounds behind it, spatted on Turkey's flat, flaring nose. Another hard fist slammed into his right eye. That eye would soon be swollen shut.

Bellowing like a mad bull. Turkey rushed forward. Striking out with both fists, his breath coming in great, sobbing gasps, heedless of all else save the desire to kill, Brick was knocked to the floor as fast as he could struggle to his feet. He did not feel the smashed lips, smashed and battered face or the pounded body. He was swimming in a red haze.

Men sickened at the sound of the blows Turkey landed on the little man. He weighed twice as much as Brick and stood a foot above him.

Then it was over. Seizing the half-conscious little man in one great hand, Turkey lifted him clear of the floor and hurled him against the bar. Brick tried to rise, but his legs would not support him.

Like a trapped animal, he glared from between puffed lids at Turkey.

"Some day—" he spat blood and gasped for breath— "you're going to find that a good little man can beat a rotten big one. You're going to pay for that," a trembling finger pointed to the dead body of Brick's partner. "Damn you!"

Turkey's heavy boots shot out again and the man on the floor collapsed. Without a backward glance, but with a queer, strange feeling in his breast, Turkey Thomas strode out. And he knew, before he was through that he would have to kill the red-headed one. He would, when a good, safe chance offered.

A HALF dozen Number One grade cross ties lay stacked to one side before Brick stopped to rest. He leaned his broad ax against a fallen pine and wiped sweat from his forehead with a calloused hand. Seated on the tie he was trimming, cigaret going, he cocked his head to one side, wrinkled his nose.

"Sheep!" he spat in distaste, speaking aloud, as is the habit of men who work alone in lonesome places.

"Don't let 'em bother you—you ain't going to be around where you have to smell 'em." Harsh, croaking, Turkey Thomas' voice sounded behind Brick.

Brick turned, inwardly surprised that he had been taken unaware. Outwardly, he showed no visible sign of emotion. His blue eyes stared at Turkey, who leaned against the trunk of a pine, flat face flaming red, a sneering smile on his puffy lips.

"Right thoughtful of you." Brick stared straight at Turkey. His voice was calm, the tones level and his speech precise and

unhurried. "But, seeing as I've just moved my camp here, and that the Government has given me grant to cut the marked stuff f[illegible]ll, I'll be around to smell the sh[illegible]nge in he[illegible].

"At [illegible], I like the smell of sheep a lot better than the stinking odor of the killer that owns them. Don't threaten me, you damned turkey buzzard. And remember what I [illegible]ou."

Turk[illegible]d. His knuckles stood out white as [illegible]ed the b[illegible] of his big gun.

"I'll giv[illegible]ou an hour to get away from here!" H[illegible]erked Brick to his feet, held him by the neck and shook him. Brick glared at him, but remained silent. "I'll give you an hour to get out of here—and until sundown to leave these mountains. If you don't, I'll break you in two with my bare hands."

Bodily, he flung the little man far into the brush.

"Get going," he snarled.

Crouched, nostrils flaring, he watched Brick get slowly to his feet, totter a few steps and lean against a tree. He fought for breath, wiped a smear of blood from his face with his shirt sleeve, turned and looked at Turkey again. His gaze was intense; his blue eyes seemed to give off sparks.

"A good little man is a damned sight better than a rotten big killer like you—and I'll live to prove it. You got me now, maybe. But I ain't beaten. And I'll be waiting at Half Point when you come in tonight."

"Out of the mountains by sundown or I'll kill you."

Turkey gritted his teeth, his muscles worked and bulged under his tight, leather jacket. One last look the little man gave him. And Turkey Thomas knew he would be waiting at the roadhouse at Half Point as he said he would.

A PILE of silver dollars and greasy bills before him, Brick cast occasional glances at the door. He was giving only a small part of his attention to the poker game in which he sat.

The atmosphere of the place seemed freighted with impending disaster. Men knew of the orders the little red-headed man had received; knew Turkey Thomas would carry out his threat to kill if the orders were not obeyed. Murder, it would be. Yet no man dared try to stop it. A few had tried to persuade the little man to leave. But they shut up and left him alone when they caught the set, fatal look on his round face.

Conversation suddenly ceased. Men tried to appear unaware that anything out of the ordinary was about to take place. Corners of his big mouth drawn down, red face now scarlet with rage, Turkey Thomas stepped through the door. Slowly, each step measured and deliberate, he walked toward the table where Brick sat.

There was challenge in Brick's voice, in his look, as he slowly turned his head and looked up at the man towering above him.

"I'm still here—buzzard face."

Turkey jerked and winced as if someone had slapped him.

"I'll take your money and then your worthless life." Turkey cursed.

He stepped around the table, shoved a man tumbling to the floor and took his seat facing Brick. Two other players at the table withdrew.

"I'VE got four hundred here," Brick smiled thinly across the table at Turkey. "I don't think you'll win it all this time. I'm dealing."

He spun the cards across to Turkey. Turkey started to swear, clamped his mouth tight shut and picked up his cards. Glaring at Brick, he shoved a hundred dollars out on the table. Grinning broadly, Brick met it and pushed forward a hundred more.

"Two!" Turkey thundered, calling for cards.

In a far corner of the room, a chair scraped as a man jerked nervously. The haze of smoke thickened as three dozen hastily puffed cigarets fogged untasted blue smoke upward. Calmly, Brick flipped two cards across the table, tossed the deck to one side.

"This is my lucky night—your unlucky one." He wagged his head at Turkey. "I got two hundred left. You know the limit. I'm playing the ones I got."

Turkey scowled, studied his hand, then shoved fifty dollars into the pot. Carelessly, eying Turkey closely, that mocking, challenging grin on his face, Brick shoved

his entire stack into the center of the table. For the space of a dozen long heartbeats, Turkey studied his cards. With a low growl, he tossed his hand away.

Laughing tauntingly, Brick laid down his cards to rake in the pot. He laid them down face upward. Turkey half rose from his chair; his head snapped around and he glared at the watchers, trying to locate the man who had dared snicker. The five cards Brick had laid down failed to reveal even a small pair.

"No guts—buzzard face," Brick grunted contemptuously as he tossed his cards across to Turkey.

Turkey gritted his teeth, grabbed the deck and ripped it in two. He snatched up another, licked his lips and dealt, his hands trembling with the strain of trying to hold himself in hand.

"Three kings and a pair of tens. Not a bad hand, Turkey, but not as good as the straight flush or full house with aces that you've dealt yourself."

Before Turkey could move, Brick had reached over and snatched his cards. He threw them face up on the table, exposing three aces and a pair of jacks.

"You can't even cheat decently," Brick snarled.

BRICK had shoved back his chair. Turkey had done likewise. Their hands were still on top of the table. Turkey tensed for the draw. Brick seemed half asleep, his eyes gleaming through half-closed lids.

Half a minute; thirty seconds that seemed like eternity to the watchers. Then Brick made the first move.

But Turkey Thomas moved faster. His gun was leaving the holster as Brick's hand closed around the butt of his own gun. Turkey Thomas was in a position to kill; still he would take no chance. He gripped the edge of the table, to hurl it over on Brick. Just for a split second he hesitated. In that instant, Brick's gun came up.

Turkey Thomas fired, but a split second too late. He spun half around, a mighty look of surprise wiping the confident, killing look from his flat face. So close together had the shots been, men stared at the combatants in wonder, trying to see who the victor might be. A thin, corkscrewing wisp of smoke floated from each gun barrel. Brick, head thrust forward, feet planted wide apart, watched Turkey.

"I'm a better little man than you are a rotten big one! Why don't you fall, you turkey buzzard?"

As if to obey this last question, Turkey Thomas collapsed, fell forward on his face. He rolled half over, wide open eyes glazing rapidly. A dark red stain spread rapidly over his shirt front. Before men could move, Brick Noble had pushed between them, was outside and walking swiftly back to his little tie camp in the mountains.

Why had Turkey hesitated that fraction of time—the fraction that cost him his life? Men looked at each other dumbly. What had Brick Noble meant by using his head?

"Turkey Thomas—he hesitate, yes." Vasquez came from behind the bar. "He is off balance, maybe. I show you why. I watch Señor Brick when he did it this afternoon, but pretend not to see."

He walked to the table where the game had been played to an end.

"You see, Turkey, he grab this table for to throw it on Brick. The table, it no throw. That is what gives Señor Brick the time he needs to get the even break. See Señors? This table, she is nailed to the floor."

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AFTER SCHMELING—WHO? Who will it be? What unsung Scion of Slug will rise to hook the crown from the champ's cocky head? Jack Kofoed gives a glimpse of some of the young comers. In the same issue, short stories, novelets, novels, and the full life story of KID McCOY, LONE WOLF OF THE RING!

FIGHT STORIES

TINHORN!

By JOHN STARR

Tinhorn Nilan—that gambling son of a corkscrew-crooked sidewinder! But wickedness reaps its Judgment Day reward. Tinhorn Nilan's payoff was Sixgun Solitaire!

THIS here Charley Nilan, *he* come by his orneryness natural-like. His granddaddy, ol' Slick Ear Nilan, came here-abouts with nothin' to his name but a wore-out blanket, thirty-five foot of hard-twist rope, an' a Miles City saddle strapped on a boogered-down gelding. The next thing we knows, Slick has registered him a brand and is ownin' the dangdest, most producin' set of cows that you ever see. We figgered it out once an' finally counts up that ever' one of them cows calved no less'n six times a year, an' even at that we has to give some of the credit for workin' double shift durin' the spring. Well, we couldn't prove nothin' exactly, so everyone was shore pleased when ol' Slick finally passes out of the picture from pure cussedness an' natural, dog-gone sorrow. Seems like he just pined away when he found he couldn't spread his Rockin' Chair brand over Cal Ford's Wagon Wheel without makin' the left flank look like a drunk Piute's idea of sunset.

All of Slick Ear's boys was like their daddy. They was hard-ridin', quick-shootin' hombres, an' they was plumb awful careless with their ropes. Folks stood it for a time, but when the boys began to get plain reckless with their rustlin' we finally goes into action. Mister, we was gentle but firm in that there action. They was hardly a tree around these parts that wasn't decorated with a Nilan an' a rope —an' some trees had two of each.

Well, anyway, this here Charley Nilan was sixteen years old when his daddy felt the sudden urge to travel. His old man beat a posse to the border by plain luck an' was never heard of again. Ed Ford felt sorry for the kid an' took him over to the Wagon Wheel to stay, but it ain't two weeks before Charley steals Ed's own mare an' disappears. We don't see hide nor hair of him until last spring when he rides in all growed up, lookin' as mangy an' worthless as his gran'-daddy did when *he* came to town.

Ed Ford is sittin' over there in front of the Palace, an' Charley rides up to him

just like it was yesterday he left with Ed's mare.

"H'lo, Ed," he says. "How you comin' on?"

Ed was sort of stunned. "Pretty good," he says finally. "What you doin' back here?"

"I come to pay you for that mare," Charley tells him. "That mare you lent me."

Ed perks up at that. "Why, you . . ."

"Of course," Charley breaks in easy-like, "I ain't aimin' to pay no cash. Fact is, Ed, I'm broke. I kinda figured mebbe I'd work it out for you."

Ed looks like he's hesitatin' between heart-failure an' hydrophoby. His face swells up an' his ears gets as red as ol' John Utterback's nose. For a minnit he's all bloated up that-a-way, but just when I'm figgerin' he's ready to do sudden slaughter with mebbe a dash of mayhem an' assault and battery, he keels over an' starts laughin' fit to bust.

"Charley," he says when he recovers, "you win. Yo're as slick an' cool as your gran'-daddy, and dam if I don't hire you just for cussedness. Where's your war-bag?"

"Why," remarks Charley as if he just remembered, "I reckon I lost it. Come to think of it, I'm shore I lost it. You can fix me up an' put it on the bill along with the mare if you want to."

Ed looks like he's goin' to have another fit but he manages to nod. "All right," he says. "You can ride out with me this afternoon."

Charley borrows a dollar off of Ed later on, an' acts sorta peeved when Ed wouldn't give him the two dollars he asked for. He gets the other dollar from me an' loses them both in a showdown for a jack-pot at the Palace just ten minutes after he gets 'em. I was sort of surprised he didn't try to borrow more, but he didn't. Seen him steal a old deck of cards, an' I reckon he figgered they was worth the money he lost. Which they shore was as things turned out.

WELL that was just the start. This here Charley Nilan settled down then to finish up with poker what his gran'daddy started with rustlin'. He gets him a black coat an' pants an' starts wearin' collars like he was a senator or a school t[illegible]cher. He was always playin' poker, an' [illegible]ver lost.

That boy was the toppin'-[illegible] player that ever drawed cards. [illegible]d that a man 'd get three q[illegible]s, wh[illegible]arley would [illegible] it with three kings. Gi[illegible] feller a fl[illegible] an' Charley would pop up with a measly full-house. He never drawed big hands—four or straight flushe[illegible]—but he managed to get the best hand[illegible]the biggest pots. There never [illegible]ight he didn't win, a[illegible] he won[illegible]vy, [illegible].

Of cours[illegible] ever'one figger[illegible] he was crooked an' they all wanted t[illegible]ar him—but nobody could ever say e[illegible]t that he done this or that outa the way. As far as proof went, Charley was as honest as Abe Lincoln. An' he had a habit of gettin' into games that was plumb oncom-pre-hensible. He'd sit around all day playin' solitaire steady an' as soon as anyone suggested poker there was Charley rarin' to go. An' you couldn't insult him enough to drive him away.

It was pretty quiet in the sheriffin' business along about that time an' I spent some time a-studying Charley. There was only two things about 'im that I was shore of—one was that he was powerful scared of guns of any description, an' the other was that he just hated to lose at *anything*.

He never wore a gun himself, an' I figgered he was so scared of 'em by the way he dived under the table an' tried to bore into the floor when Fat Patterson let Demon Rum led him to believe that he was a better man with a Colt's than Ed Ford was. Charley was gone under the table before Fat got his gun out of the holster, an' he didn't come up until they dragged Fat out of there. He was one scared hombre, too, when he did appear finally. Ed asked him did he drop anything, but Charley wasn't sayin' nothin' right then. If he had he'd have bit his tongue in two with his teeth chatterin'.

I knowed he hated to lose from watchin' him play solitaire. That boy took his game plumb earnest. He'd play hour after hour an' cuss the cards like they was personal enemies of his whenever they wouldn't come right. I never did see him win from Ol' Sol, an' one day I ask him did he ever. He says "Yeah—once or twice," but he looked so mangy about it I figger he cheated them times.

AT poke[illegible], however, it was different—as I sa[illegible]fore. Charley kept on winnin' an[illegible] until it got shore enough disgra[illegible]ally Chuckwalla an' Ory Perdu[illegible] some[illegible] the boys come to see me abo[illegible]t.

"Sheriff," says Chuckwalla, who's [illegible]een appointed to speak, "we come to talk to you abo[illegible] this here low-down, crooked Charley [illegible]n. We are plumb disgusted with tha[illegible]'e's face an' we'd admire if you as[illegible]d h[illegible]olite to t[illegible]e it to some other thr[illegible]' community."

"Hell, [illegible]uckwalla," I tells him, "how you goin' t[illegible]'un a man out of town just for bein' a good poker player. It ain't in the law."

"We got that figgered, too," he declares. "We aim to show up this here Charley Nilan for a tin-horn crook an' we aim to have you take back the money he won illegal—likewise various personal trinkets—an' give him a personal escort to the border. Or mebbe we might build him a rope ladder to Boot Hill."

"If there's any ex-courtin' to be done," I remarks, "I'll do it, being the law. However," I asks, "how do you reckon to prove he's crooked?"

Chuckwalla looks at me happy. "Back-to-Back Holderby," he hollers.

Well, if there's anyone knows crooked cards it's this Back-to-Back Holderby. He's just about as smooth as they come an' he knows crooked cards from all the inside angles—bein' a awful dam' crook himself. Chuck tells me Back-to-Back will come over from Mercer for the Saturday night game, an' I agree to bet back the money an' run Charley out of town provided they prove he's crooked. That was a Thursday.

Back-to-Back comes to town bright an' early Saturday morning. By noon he's taken out a small stack in a five-handed game with Charley an' Ory Perdue an' a couple hands from the Bar-M-Bar. It ain't much of a game but a whole darn crowd is watchin' includin' Chuckwalla an' some other heavy losers.

The cards go 'round ten-twelve times with nothin' much happening. Then it comes Charley's deal an' he wins a medium-size pot with two pair over Back-to-Back's queens and sevens. I sees Holderby's eyes blink sorta funny an' gets ready for action.

Nothin' happens until Charley deals again. Then, just as he's dealt the fourth card 'round I sees Back-to-Back nod at Chuckwalla. Chuck's gun pops out and stares Charley in the face.

"Hold that deal!" orders Chuckwalla. Charley shivers at the gun an' starts to say something but Chuck stops him. Then Back-to-Back speaks up.

"Pretty slick," he says. "The boy is clever. He finger marks 'em, deals seconds, an' crimps right nice. He set the deck just now an' crimped so Perdue would cut just where he wanted. If you look at his hand you'll find the ace of hearts an' the ace of clubs I held last time."

I turns Charley's cards over, an' sure enough Holderby's right. "Come across, Charley," I says. "Yo're finished."

Charley ain't payin' no attention to me, though; he's staring pale-faced at Chuckwalla's gun. "Tell 'im to put that dam' thing down," he chatters. "I know when I'm beat."

Charley comes back to normal when Chuck's gun is gone. He unwinds a money-belt from his waist and tosses 'er on the table. "What you goin' to do, Sheriff?" he asks me.

"Reckon you better hit it across the line an' play with the Mex boys a while," I tells him. "I'll come along to see you don't get lost or stray from the road."

He kinda snarls at that, but when Chuckwalla makes like he's goin' to draw he agrees easy enough. Chuck decides he'll have the pleasure of helpin' me do the ex-court, an' th three of us rides off for the line.

We leave Charley about two miles this side of the Rio in the shade of a rock ledge an' start back to town. However, we ain't turned around five minnits when Chuck wants to go back an' see has Charley really headed for the line. It ain't no use to argue with Chuck so I agree.

WHEN we ride up pretty close to where we left him I remarks his feet stickin' out behind a rock. Chuck decides we better sneak up an' see what he's doin', an' I agreed again. We creep up quiet-like on the other side of the ledge an' peck over.

There's Charley all stretched out as calm

as you please a-playin' solitaire like he was in his room at the Palace. He's so interested in the game he never takes his eyes up. He lays the cards down slow and careful like it was a ceremony or something—but that was the way he always done it.

Pretty soon he begins to cuss. He cussed like someone just insulted his whole family, cut his baby brother's throat, burned down his house, an' swung his feeble old grand-mammy seven times around his head by the off leg—or something like that. I looks closer and saw what's the matter. He's played all his cards out an' can't get to a couple of aces he's buried. All of a sudden he stops cussin' an' begins to finger the buried cards. Pretty soon he finds a ace an' flips 'er up with a grunt of satisfaction.

That was too much for Chuckwalla. Before I know it he's jumped down in front of Charley an' is pokin' a gun in his face.

"By god, Charley Nilan," says Chuckwalla, "you're too dam' crooked to live. By rights I ought to salivate you right here, an' I would if it wasn't for poisoning the coyotes. You're such a dam' natural-born crook you cheat yoreself if you can't cheat anybody else."

He stops to think what to say next while Charley sits and stares at the muzzle of his gun. Charley don't say nothin'. It's right then the big idea hits Chuckwalla. He points to the cards with his foot.

"Pick 'em up," he says. Charley done it. "Shuffle 'em," orders Chuckwalla. Charley done the best he could what with tremblin'. "Now lay 'em out for solitaire!" howls Chuck. "By Gawd, you're going to play one honest game of cards in yore life, an' me an' this ol' .45 is goin' to watch you do it. Make one crooked move an' yo're perforated. . . . Deal, you Tin-horn, deal!"

CHARLEY looked like he thought Chuckwalla was crazy, but when the .45 poked at him he starts to deal *muy pronto*. He didn't lay 'em out quite exact, neither.

When he had 'em laid out he looks at Chuck again an' Chuck waved the gun. Charley begins to play like he was in a hurry, an' darned if they don't fall pretty. Before long Charley got so interested in the game he mighty nigh forgot all about Chuckwalla and his gun—and so did I.

The cards fell fine. All t[illegible]es come up an' everything looked g[illegible] he only [illegible]ing wrong was that Charl[illegible] deuce of hearts buried under [illegible]queen [illegible]oades an' couldn't get the queen off. I [illegible]'d 'im cuss low in his throat an' his hands were twitching.

Finally all the cards was out an' the deuce was still buried. A gam[illegible]e should a won lost by a dam' deu[illegible] saw his hands twitch [illegible]ain, an' [illegible] his eyes glitter when he looked at a [illegible]ck king stickin' face-up in front of hir[illegible] He was thinkin' if he could put the q[illegible]n on the king he'd win.

His eyes flashes again when he picks the queen up. He drops it with a nervous snarl as he looked up to see Chuckwalla an' that big ol' gun. Fidgetin' like he is he reaches for the queen again. Natural-born crookedness, I says to myself, fightin' ag'in fear of the gun.

He holds the queen in his hand delicate-like, an' I hears Chuckwalla grunt in disgust. Charley snarls again. Then, before I can see what's happenin', Charley's half up. Chuckwalla r'ares back but he can't get away. Before he can even fire Charley's hopped him. He gives Chuck's arm a twist, an' the next thing I know he brings up the gun an' wrops the bar'l around Chuckwalla's big nose. Chuckwalla drops down like a mountain kicked 'im.

An' right there come the funny part! That damn' crooked Charley Nilan just turns back from Chuck almost like nothin' happened. He squats down again, picks up the queen calm as you please, plays 'er on the black king an' proceeds to run out his cards. I'm sittin' back there plumb paralyzed.

Then this Charley Nilan picks up his deck careful, shoves it in his pocket, an' ambles over to his hoss. He picks up the reins an' hops aboard. He never even looked back at Chuckwalla as he trots away to the border.

"What the hell," moans Chuck when I'd brung him to, "was you a-doin' while I was battlin' for life with that dam' wilecat?"

"I was sittin' back plain awed," I tells 'im. "Plain awed with the natural-born wickedness of that there Charley Nilan!"

GUN-PLAY GAMBLE

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Long loops and slick irons had whittled away that prodigal's cowland heritage. But stubborn Slate Wyndam swore he'd rear his cattle realm anew—though he built on the quaking quicksands of six-gun supremacy.

A Complete Southwest Novel

SLATE WYNDAM had ridden west from the T2 headquarters. Now he jogged past the southern front of old "Givadam" Free's Lazy-F. Upon the crest of a low hill he reined in Midnight, his long-legged black gelding, for his eyes fell upon a lone rider who moved slowly through the mesquite toward him.

"Givadam's nine foot taller'n whoever that is," Slate grinned. "Looks like—

Por dios, por dios! Looks like Marge!"

The grin widened on his tanned, happy-go-lucky face, for he was one of the most cheerful redheads in all the world. He had seen very little of Margery Free in the three weeks since her return to the border country—not half enough of her. For in his two years of wandering, Margery had grown into a very lovely young lady, indeed. Slate had excellent eyes. . . .

The girl came nearer. She seemed to recognize him at a distance—as he had recognized her. She rode up the slope to where he waited and pulled in the hammer-headed and vicious-seeming gray she rode. She ignored Slate's word and smile. Instead, she looked at him calmly and—inch-by-inch, almost, up and down. As if he were a horse for sale, Slate thought.

"Not bad, huh?" he inquired. "No use yo' goin' to town, now you've had a chance to look *me* over. Yucca'll seem right flat an' piddlin'. Well, how's tricks on the old Lazy-F, Marge? Yo' pa all right, o' course? Yesterday close to sundown, I was amblin' around the Goblet water-hole an' I heard a noise kind o' like a locomotive-whistle an' I said to myself 'Givadam's givin' a dam' about somethin' again.' "

MARGERY smiled, in spite of herself, but turned serious again instantly. Slate studied her lazily. She was certainly a looker—this slim, dusky haired daughter of his father's old friend. Changed a lot, since the times when they went together to Ma Pettingrew's school in Yucca City. Quite grown up. . . . Quite!

"The Lazy-F has a way of taking care of itself, Slate," she said slowly. "But—how are tricks on the T2?"

Slate stared into her eyes, but found the dark depths unreadable. He wondered at her peculiar tone—that hinted at something quite definite, serious, behind her question.

"All right," he said with small shrug. "Why wouldn't they be? O' course, I'm kind o' out o' joint with things in this neck o' the woods. You can't be away more'n two years an' not lose touch some. But I reckon we'll make out."

"You—think so? Well, I'm looking at your right-hand overalls-pocket," she told him slowly. "For—I've already looked at the left-hand pocket. I—Slate, *is* that ...lge I see caused by a roll of bills? By ...—three thousand dollars?"

"Goodness me, no!" he c... grinning a ...in. "That's just my bun... ...ewin' wax. What're you drivin' at, a ...ow? The mortgage old Ab Diffy's got p...ered onto the T2? You know, Marge, when I got the telegram in Kansas City that Dad was goin', I come down like the clatter-wheels o' Hades. But he was u...conscious when I come into the ro... He just roused up once an' the... ...ny for long enough to tell me that his will ... made out, leavin' me the outfit, an' th... Ab had a plaster on it for three thou...d. He mumbled somethin' about Ab bein' willin' to renew the mortgage, then—well, he never was conscious after that. An' havin' none but Mex' *vaqueros* on the place, I been kind o' up in the air about what was what."

"Dad could have told you—a good deal."

"Oh, I— Well—I didn't much want to bother him," Slate said without entire truth. Actually, he had not gone to Givadam because he knew that he would be cramful of good advice before he got away. And Slate hated good advice. He much preferred to figure things out for himself.

"Can you meet the mortgage next month?" she demanded—as if it were in some way her affair. Slate grinned:

"Do'no. I got a bunch o' cows an' calves that ought to cover it, if worst comes to worst. But I really need 'em. So I aimed to ride in, today, to see Ab Diffy. To ask him to renew the mortgage when it comes due. For a year."

"He won't do it!" she said flatly. "How do I know that? Slate, you—you simply don't know what you're bucking! I wondered if you had any idea. Now—I know that you've none at all. You're just as you always were! Going along through life with a big grin and perfect trust in everybody. And due to wake up one fine morning, soon, without the filling in your teeth."

"Goodness me!" Slate cried with mock earnestness. "Bad as that? Minus even my gold fillin's, the which I got none?"

"Worse than that! Somebody has picked the T2 for target. In the last year, your father lost almost three-fourths of his stuff. He wrote you, even, to come back and help him. It— You should have

come, Slate. He was hurt when y[illegible] wouldn't."

"Ask[illegible]o come back! I never knew that—a[illegible] I'd have come with my h[illegible]r in a [illegible], [illegible]d got that letter."

"[illegible] was why he borrowed from Ab Diffy. It's puzzling. Neither our stuff nor Bill Fryman's—the Pitchfork, you know—has been bothered. Nor have the rustlers worried the Circle-Cross, or Butcher Knife, [illegible]-X—or any of the outfits north and ea[illegible]d west of here. Just T2 stuff ta[illegible]n. And with no trace of any sort, to say [illegible]hich way they've gone. We've been wo[illegible]ering how long it would be before you lost some more."

"AN' that's why Ab Diffy won't renew?" Slate nodded humorously. "He's a great oldy Ab. All he wants for security to his money is a four hund'd per cent certainty an' yo' underwear. But, if he won't renew, I can still hand over the cows an' calves an' sort o' angle wormly—in a way."

"You'd better sell to Bill Fryman," she suggested suddenly, watching him. "He offered you eight thousand and assumption of the mortgage, didn't he?"

"Ten thousand—at the last," Slate grinned. "But—no, I reckon I won't sell out."

He turned in the saddle to stare south and east. The yellowish plain stretched away, at their horses' feet, for miles and miles. Then—like a polished scimitar on a billiard table—there was the river, curving silvery among the green of the bosques that rimmed it. In Mexico, far beyond, the dun mountains reared against the serene blue of the southwestern sky.

"I like it down here—lots," Slate explained simply. "I have always wanted to sit like this, on a hilltop, an' say that verse Mother always liked: 'For every beast o' the forest is mine, an' the cattle upon a thousand hills.' Nah! If this Mister Fryman wants him another ranch, he better send off to Sears, Roebuck an' order him one."

A DUST-CLOUD reared abruptly, on the crest of a hogback a mile below them. They watched it, Margery frowning a little, Slate humming carelessly and wondering who rode so fast. It was a tight little knot of horsemen and when they were almost upon the two on the hilltop, Slate leaned suddenly forward. They were *vaqueros* of his—four of his six. He cried out to them and they jerked the wild-eyed little horses to a sliding stop and stared down at their employer.

"In the Little Pasture!" gasped Juan Ruiz, the *mandador*, "We found Simon Morales and Luis Arguello. They lay upon the grass, belly downward, *but with faces upturned to the sky!* The Devil walked in the Little Pasture last night, where Simon and Luis slept!"

He illustrated the gruesome posture of the two dead men. Evidently, their necks had been broken and twisted. With a shrill yell, the *mandador* spurred his mount by. The others followed him in a scattering group. Down the far side of the hill they poured and vanished. Slate looked after them, then at Margery Free.

"Reckon I better look at the Little Pasture!" he shrugged. She studied him, then shook her head helplessly.

"Will you never sober up?" she demanded. "Do you still consider it all a huge joke?"

"Sober up!" he countered, mechanically. "Why, I do'no' when I've had a drink to sober up from!"

He found her riding stirrup-to-stirrup with him, when he sent Midnight down the hill and at a long gallop toward the Little Pasture. He waved her back, but she shook her head. So they rode fast, back the way Slate had come, then past the T2 house and into the Little Pasture. Slate clicked tongue against teeth suddenly. There had been between three hundred and four hundred cows with calves, in the Little Pasture. So far as he could see, now, there was not one head of stock anywhere.

He knew where the two *vaqueros* had bedded down the night before—which was fortunate, for this pasture was twenty miles across. Presently, they came up to the water-hole where blackened embers remained of a fire—and where lay, in that weird fashion Juan the *mandador* had described, the Mexicans Simon and Luis. They had been killed in their blankets. Not a mark was on either, except the gruesomely turned heads. Nor was there a track to be seen about the little camp.

Slate straightened, where he had bent

over them. He looked to northward—where those cows which would have lifted the mortgage might be grazing. But he had no idea that they were there. And there was not the half of three thousand dollars in stock remaining on the T2.

II

OLD Ab Diffy was about as well known throughout the Yucca country as Yucca Peak. He had been there—so Ananias Alexander always claimed—since the Peak was a three-cornered hole seven feet deep. And—Ananias would end his ponderings—Ab Diffy never would die, but like an old gray mule, he would "just go back to Georgia."

Slate Wyndam leaned in the doorway of Ab's office and looked thoughtfully at the lawyer-capitalist.

"You just won't take stock in me, huh?" he grinned.

Ab shook his ginger-gray head, without lifting gaunt, lantern-jawed face. Apparently, the fishy gray eyes were intent on the papers that littered his pine table-desk.

"An' you won't do like you promised Dad—renew the mortgage, huh? In other words, 't was just talk; like as if, that day, you'd told him it might rain . . . I—see."

"I'd have renewed—for him. Poor business. Good chance of losing. But still a chance of not losing. He died. Bargain's off. Don't renew. *Not for ten seconds.* You're a fool kid, Slate Wyndam! You wouldn't sell to Fryman when you had a chance. He won't offer you much, now. Not with those cows rustled. You lost your opportunity."

"Then—this is fair enough!—le' me have one thousand pesos more. The outfit's worth twice, maybe three times, four thousand. You can't lose. An'—don't you sabe, man? I got not a hand on the place! Not even a grub-wrangler. I got to hire help an' salty. For I have got to get back those cows an' tie a knot in the rustlers' tails an' settle wi' you, in twenty-seven days. Think I want you foreclosin' on the T2? I can fight on a thousand dollars."

"Not—one—copper—cent!" Ab Diffy said evenly, but with tremendous finality. Slate nodded—face calm, but eyes smoldering, now:

I said I could fight on a thousand dol-[illegible]s. Well, I can fight on just nine hundred an' three-fifty less'n th[illegible]w that yo[illegible] make me. An', fella! I[illegible]ve got the notion you'll foreclose a[illegible] cr[illegible]me out—buck that notion off!"

He whirled with that grand defiance. An odd, dry, little sound followed him. He did not turn. He knew very well that it was merely Ab Diffy laughing.

WITHIN two hours, [illegible]had combed the town. He missed nobody who might have money to loan, fr[illegible] Sully Wiggins, the president of the Yt[illegible]a State Bank, to little Ike Wooperman o[illegible] the Chicago Store. He got several different sorts of refusal and always, when he repeated that he could fight on ninety-six dollars and fifty cents, he heard laughter following him outside. When he got to the sheriff's office, at last, laughter greeted him. He looked steadily at the sheriff and at Low Pockets Neese, the deputy.

"So yuh aim to clean up them rustlers single-handed, huh, Slate?" Sheriff Drain inquired—and went off into another near-spasm of amusement, in which Low Pockets joined.

"Now, what'd be the use o' askin' for help here?" Slate wondered, studying the thin face and the weak mouth of Bert Drain and the wishy-washy features of Low Pockets, his echo.

"What you doin' in here, Berty?" he asked the sheriff, pretending not to see the chip-diamond-studded solid gold shield on Drain's spotted calf-hide vest. "Sher'f catches you boys messin' around here, he'll boot you-all clean into the waterin' trough, he will. He never did like you; always said you was too—sneaky, wasn't it?"

"Blocker ain't sher'f no more!" Drain yapped furiously, straightening in his chair. "We th'owed him out on his neck last election an'—"

"You don't mean to say Yucca put *you* in to make a rack for a sher'f's clothes? You ain't askin' me to believe that?" cried Slate. "You can understand a drouth or a cloudburst a-hittin' Yucca, but not a thing like that happenin' to us! Don't try to hooraw me, Berty! I been hoorawed by grown up men. But when the sher'f comes in, you tell him I said the' was two o' my *vaqueros* dead in my Little Pasture—killed

by rustlers. An' three-four hund'd he[ad] o' my stuff gone."

But [he] turned away, leaving Bert Drain[ard] speechless with rage for the mom[ent], he [shook] his head. It began to look as if he [was] doomed to lone wolf it.

THERE was a tough saloon on the edge of Yucca. As he clumped along without much noticing where he went, he came to [a] reeling, false-fronted frame shack. Mec[hanically], he looked sidewise at the animals along the hitch-rack. Three scrubby-looking Pitchfork horses—and one splendid sleight bay with the same brand.

Voices from the saloon's interior—angry voices—drew his eyes from the horse to the side-door of the place. He moved quietly around the corner and down to the door where he could look in without being noticed. There was a hard-looking bunch along the rickety pine bar. Two of them, he knew very well—Squints Agee and Feathers Flint. They had been suspicious characters in Yucca County ever since Slate could remember. Just now, they seemed very friendly with others to the tune of nine or ten, just as hard-faced.

"Damned lucky for ye, Greaser—" this was Squints to a man Slate could not see "—that the law *makes* ye hang up y'r hardware in town. Else ye'd git y'self pistol-whupped down the Main Drag till y'r tail was brushin' the wagon-tracks. No dam' Tamale-Gobbler can . . ."

"S-s-so!" a level voice drawled, metallically. Slate stepped quietly inside, the better to see.

SQUINTS moved suddenly as he came in—to smack his head against the head of Feathers Flint. He howled furiously and charged. Then out from the bar came a slim, sinewy man, sliding away from Squints' clumsy rush as gracefully as a cat. He had a brown, lean face and sea-blue eyes that shone, now. His mouth was lifted at the corners in a gentle smile, beneath small, spike-pointed black mustache.

He was as much the dandy in his appearance as was that calico horse at the hitch-rack. His blue shirt was of fine flannel, his trousers of hand-woven wool, skin-tight. His boots looked like a hundred dollars. He wore no visible weapon—any more than did the others, here in town.

Squints and Feathers rushed out at him. He kicked Squints very deftly in the pit of the stomach and danced sidewise, with a whoop of enjoyment. In he came and seemed to fall against Feathers. Feathers' feet immediately left the floor and he came down sidewise to smack his head against the warped pine floor. Then all the others rushed him at once.

For a space, this lean, grinning fellow of the dare-devil face was busy as an armless man sorting wasps. And the attackers fared rather poorly. But they surrounded him—and Slate saw a man on the rear-edge of the circle pull out a .45 from under his shirt.

It was none of his business, but it had riled him to see this gang of hard cases combining to get one man. The .45 settled his uncertainty.

"Watch him!" Slate yelled warning. "He's got a—gun!"

He hurled himself at the group, but the stranger was nearer. He caught a man by the neck and jerked up his knee to the groin, then flung the twisted-faced one back into his fellows. His hand flashed to the back of his neck and returned with a ten-inch long knife. In he came and drove the blade through the gun-arm of the fellow who had just drawn. The .45 dropped and Slate, who had swung on one man, stooped flashingly and caught it before it struck the floor. Then he yelled:

"Stick 'em up—ever'body! You're rammin' yo' noses against the Gates Ajar! Grab a star or grab a harp!"

They turned sullenly to face him. Slowly, their hands climbed. Slade gestured with the Colt-muzzle, indicating the storeroom at the saloon's rear. They gave back. He stepped toward them and they retreated more hastily. Back into the dusky room he drove them, jerked the door shut and dropped its bar. Then he looked at the tall man, who was breathing in tremendous gulps—but still grinning.

"Fella," said Slate, "you an' me, we better build us a cloud o' dust. The sher'f, he don't love me a bit."

"Can happen!" the stranger grinned.

AT the hitch-rack, he jerked loose the slip-knotted rein ends that held the calico horse. He looked inquiringly at Slate, then.

"My hawse is over yonder in Migg['s] corral," Slate told him. "Come on ove[r] You better ride out a way wi' me."

He saddled Midnight quickly, in the corral, then looked at the loads in his twin Colts that hung by the belts on the saddle-horn. The tall man had reached into his saddle-pockets and brought out a pearl-handled Colt in hand-stamped holster, with cartridge belt wrapped around it. This he buckled on, as Slate put on his own.

"Milgracias, señor!" grinned the stranger. "She's one w'at you're call tough bunch, no? But we're help 'em to git sick, hah! Me, I'm Carlos José de Guerra y Morales, señor—w'at them fella call Chihuahua Joe. Señor! Me, I'm most glad to be acquaint' with you."

"I run what's left o' the T2," Slate grinned, swinging up. "Tell you the rest as we hightail. From the li'l' noises up the street, our sher'f figures she's safe to come see what the racket's all about. We better split the breeze."

Out on the road to the T2, Slate found himself talking easily to this tall dare-devil—of the condition of the outfit; of the dead *vaqueros;* of his lone condition; of the answers he had got in town, to requests for a loan.

"Por—dios!" cried Chihuahua Joe at the last. "Me, I'm think you're wrong, Slate! About be alone, *Segura Miguel!* Me, I'm ride up in them dam' Territory an' hunt them rustler. I'm go to Arizona—she's not much, now. So I'm stay here an' I'm paint them T2 brand on my Ween-chestair. *Si, amigio mio!* We're find them fella w'at steal your cow—an' we're help them to git most dam' sick—so sick they're curl up an' die!"

III

HE waved aside Slate's every half-hearted protest. He was grinning like a kid headed for a circus. Money interested him not at all, he said. He had bucked the tiger two weeks before and he had seven hundred dollars.

"Turn 'round about!" he settled the argument. "She's fair play. You're help me, now I'm help you. W'at the hell!"

He tickled the calico horse and made it dance. His blue eyes twinkled as they roved ceaselessly over all the countr[y] ahead. It was at his suggestion that t[hey] went on by the smokeless T[ank] use and began to comb the Little Pas[ture] gain.

"My father, she's th[e] aniard of Madrid. But my mother, she's t[he] Navajo. An' me, Chihuahua Joe, I'm the dam' fine trailer. We're have one look for track, hah?"

They worked the Little Pasture during the rest of the day and made camp that night at a water-hole. [Lay]ing on their blankets after supper, smoking, they got better acquainted. Slate began to guess that here was one with a rec[ord]; one well known along his back-trail. He had been a ranch-foreman and a deputy of the famous Smoky Cole, up in the Territory.

"Well," Chihuahua yawned, at last, "me, I'm catch them forty winks. *Mañana, amigo mio,* we're have them excitement. *Sí,* my toes, they're tickle. She's the sure sign. You're see!"

Slate lay awake for a little while after Chihuahua's regular breathing proclaimed him asleep. There was no moon, but the low-hanging topaz stars were out. He stared up at the black vault that canopied the earth and listened to a coyote yapping on a far-away hill. He felt oddly at ease. With a man like Chihuahua Joe at his stirrup, he felt that he could ride with some hope of making that boast to Diffy come true. He fell asleep.

Chihuahua's hand on his face waked him. He opened his eyes without moving. It was even darker than when he had gone to sleep. He heard nothing but coyotes' voices. He wondered what had alarmed Chihuahua. He asked, in a whisper.

"Coyotes!" Chihuahua answered in similar whisper. "Me, *I'm* think them coyotes have two legs. . . . We're see, Slate! I'm tell you my toes, they're tickle!"

Slate picked up his carbine. Chihuahua was arranging the blankets to make them look as if they were still occupied. He and Slate crawled away from the water-hole and the tiny, sullen glow of the embers. Thirty yards or so away, they lay flat with carbines in hand. Colts belted around them. Time passed.

Slate, too, now found something odd about the coyotes' yapping—that ringed the camp about. He recalled those two luckless *vaqueros* of his, who had died at

he lower water-hole the night before. It [illegible] not a particularly pleasant memory, lying here in the pitchy dark before the dawn, with [illegible]at eerie yap-yap-yapping seeming to [illegible]in upon them.

"We'[illegible] help them to git dam' sick!" Chihuahua suddenly chuckled in his ear. *"Por—dios!* One wasp-nest, they're think they're kiss! Me, I'm all Navajo, w'en time's like this!"

THERE was never a sound to tell who came—or wh[illegible]. The coyote-yelps ceased, even. But Slate, staring tensely this way a[illegible] that way, suddenly saw the fire's dull g[illegible]w disappear—and reappear. Then it seemed to him that he heard the slightest of thudding noises from where their blankets lay.

"Agghhh!" breathed Chihuahua.

His Winchester began to drum. In all his life, Slate had never heard a carbine fired so fast. He opened up, also, shooting—as he guessed Chihuahua shot—at the ground around the fire, hoping to hit anything about it. There was a fierce chorus of yells—startled, furious, disappointed—to tell that someone was there. Then from low down came answering fire and bullets began to thut-thut-thut against the ground near where they lay.

"We're better make that rock," Chihuahua snarled in his ear. "There will be a dozen men, mebbe!"

They ran, bent over, to the shelter of the big boulder forty yards on their left. They dropped down in its shadow and watched sardonically while a rain of lead dug the ground about their old position. And now the firing was coming not only from the fire, but from behind the place where they had been.

Chihuahua made a sighing sound like a contented cat's purr. He opened up on the flashes that stabbed the night beyond the water-hole, while Slate rained lead at the riflemen near the fire.

They were perfectly sheltered by small rocks around the boulder. Even when their attackers began to fire at the new position, none of the bullets came too close. Occasional yells of pain told them that their shots had not been useless.

Suddenly, there sounded a high, thin yell. Wordless, yet it sounded like a summons. The firing stopped. Slowly the attackers left—or Slate guessed that they had [illegible]ft. After the din of the rifle-fire, a si[illegible]ence fell over the water-hole.

They did not move until the gray light of dawn showed the scene empty of menace. Then they rose stiffly and went back to camp. It was a wreck! Their blankets, bullet-torn in many places, had been trampled into the churned earth. Chihuahua's fry-pan and the can in which they had made coffee were in the water. The saddles, alone, seemed to have escaped damage.

Slate looked around. Midnight and Chihuahua's calico were grazing calmly on a little ridge five or six hundred yards away.

Chihuahua went like a bloodhound over all the ground. He came back, presently, to where Slate was staring down at the imprint of a sandaled foot in the soft earth at the water's edge. He looked down at the track, then grinned.

"You're see 'em, too, hah? Me, I'm think w'ile we're fight, they're too dam' quiet for white men. Mexicans! *Pues,* we're hit some. The ground, she's bloody plenty places. Who will these be, hah? You're not guess?"

"Could be raiders from over the line," Slate frowned. "But there's been mighty little o' that kind o' rustlin' in late years. Anyhow, what they'd expect to find in this pasture, I don't know. If this is the outfit that downed my *vaqueros,* they ought to know they cleaned the place when they run off the cows I had in here. *Por dios!* You might figure they was after us an' nothin' else. Knew we was here, you know!"

"She's happen, mabbe," Chihuahua nodded. "Well, I got not a dam' thing for to do an' mabbe forty year for to finish him, so w'at the hell! We're take one look around, Slate."

AFTER breakfast, they rode south, cow-hunting. But not a recent sign of cattle could they find. They came to the green wilderness of the bosque along the River, cut and cross-cut with cattle and game trails. Yet no sign of anything alive in either Texas or Mexico. They turned west—heading toward the river-pastures of the Lazy-F.

Chihuahua stopped once and looked up the river-trail. There was a man on a

horse, sitting on the crest of a hogback a quarter-mile ahead.

"He's look very interest', hah?"

Slate nodded. They rode on. The horseman still stared down at the trail and seemed not to hear the soft beat of their horses' hoofs. He was a stranger—so much Slate saw quickly—a roly-poly figure who threatened to burst the cowboy brown ducks he wore. As they came softly up behind him, he shook his bare yellow head slowly and took a match from the band of his black hat. He put the hat on and, still staring down flicked match-head on thumb-nail. And then—

The hammer-headed zebra-dun he straddled seemed to explode. Down went its wicked head; up in the air it went and landed on four stiff legs. Up it went again, grunting and squealing; down again. It bucked furiously, at times landing with belly touching the sand; coming up again in diagonal jumps. The yellow-haired fat man was pulling leather desperately, for he had been caught utterly unaware.

Chihuahua and Slate pulled in and watched, grinning. Chihuahua remarked pensively that he could see the whole range of the Mexican mountains between the saddle and the seat of the rider's Booger Reds. Then—the saddle slipped a trifle. The fat man went sideway, out of it. But he did not fall clear. His right boot hung in the tapidero'd stirrup. The zebra-dun jumped forward, bucking, squealing, like a killing fury.

Chihuahua swore and moved where he sat the calico. But Slate rammed the hooks into Midnight and jerked his rope loose from the strap. He shook out a loop and Midnight charged after the squealing dun. The loop settled over the wicked head. Chihuahua flashed up and bent from the saddle. He caught the dragged one's collar and the fat man had presence of mind enough to shove his free foot up and cock the stirrup.

SLATE hauled the dun off to the side. Chihuahua let go his grip and the fat man sat up and wiped his dirty face with his arm. He stared at the dun, now standing with head down and an expression of complete detachment from all the scene.

"Yuh dad-burned anamorphoscopic epiglottis!" said the fat man passionately, to the dun. "Yuh discrimatory cenogenesis! Yuh epicy—"

"Hey! Hey!" Slate yelled at him. "None o' that, fella! I don't mind what you call him, really. But you get mu' cock-eyed with that kind o' talk. I don't know what yo' words mean, but they sound plumb irreligious."

"I don't know what they mean, neither," the fat man admitted. A sudden grin split his smeared round face. "Yuh see, I rode herd on a bug-huntin' professor one time, down in the Big Bend. Gen'l'men! I certainly put a loop over a flock o' seventeen-hand language. An' when I git myself worked up, like now, she just comes a-rollin' out with no work to me."

He got up and beat his clothes; picked up his hat.

"Yo'se truly for the pick-up!" he said. "That—the' alomorphic goniometer. would've drug me to death."

"What was you so interested in?" Slate asked—and looked down at the trampled earth.

"Cow-trail—headin' into Old Mexico," the fat man said briefly, with jerk of yellow head. "I used to ease around the Rangers, some. An' when I see ary cow-tracks headin' toward Mexico, she sho' gits me plumb fascinated."

"Cows! Headin' into Old Mexico!" cried Slate. He and Chihuahua stared. Chihuahua moved along the trail and presently yelled fiercely to Slate:

"Las sandalias! Them sandals, Slate. She's your T2 cows, I'm bet five dollar!"

But that was a point which not even the imprint of a sandaled foot could settle. However Slate had no doubt that his rustled cattle had crossed the river here. He lifted his face grimly to stare across at the Mexican side. The fat man was watching him narrowly. Now he spurred forward, for he had remounted the zebra-dun.

"Name's Luckett," he announced. "Lum Luckett. Top-hand, if I do have to say her myself. Yuh don't happen to be Wolf Wyndam's boy? I'm a-huntin' the T2 an' Wolf Wyndham. Wolf writ me a letter a spell back, askin' me to come work for him."

Slate explained the situation. Lum Luckett pondered the matter. At last, he looked across the river.

"I never come all this way, to ride for

the T2, to turn around now! Aw, to hell with the pay! Yuh can owe it to me a spell. If the three o' us can't put the T2 where she can pay top-wages to top-hands, I won't figger on not money comin'."

"Certainly glad to have you!" Slate told him. "I'm beginnin' to feel like, maybe, we'll slam these cow-thieves just about midway between their minds an' their mouths. I— Huh! Here comes the saddest man an' the worryin'est man in the state. . . . 'Givadam' Free. They named him that because he 's always givin' a dam' about somethin' that wouldn't worry a flealess pup. Wonder what he's givin' a dam' about, now?"

IV

GIVADAM FREE reined in his gigantic bay and from somewhere deep within the seven feet of him, made a rumbling as of distant thunder. From one to the other of them he looked. When his black eyes came back to Slate the grim-faced, his craggy features took on an expression of terrific sadness.

"Yo' sh' are hubbin' hell, boy!" he said mournfully. "I have been easin' around the River, now, it's goin' on fifty year, but I do'no' jist when I see anybody gether more trouble in a li'l' loop than yo' pa done. An' he willed her all to y', Slate. If I was buckin' what y're buckin', I would jist naterally grab the chance to sell out to Bill Fryman an shake this country loose from my Justins, I would. Y' got no chance to beat 'em, boy."

"While they're havin' dinner, I'll maybe collect me a saddle-snack," Slate shrugged, without interest in the jeremiad.

"More apt to collect y' a nice, quiet bunk on the hill, alongside yo' pa. Y' ought to sell out to Fryman.

"I wonder how you'd be talkin', if the thieves had smacked yo' herds," Slate drawled. "Would you be sellin' out to Fryman if he offered you two-bits on the Big Dollar? Well, I'm not! I'm goin' to hit back! See where my stuff went over the River? The gang come down on Chihuahua an' me before daylight today. We shot 'em up a few. Mexicans. I can't figure, yet, what they was after—except our scalps. The only stuff left on the T2 is my hawse-herd an' a little bunch o' steers an' about a hundred cows—all up by the Gobbet water-hole."

"They ain't bothered me none—nor Fryman, neither," Givadam said with a sort of self-satisfied sadness. "Reckon they want to pick 'em a soft spot for their thieveries."

"She's more company," Chihuahua drawled. *"Por dios*—she's ride like for to dinner, w'at?"

IT was a cowboy and a Lazy-F man. He was coming with elbows punching the breeze, bent low over the saddle-horn like a jockey. They could see his quirt working back and forth—shoulders to rump. Givadam—who had recognized him instantly—began to scowl. Slate had the feeling of impending events. Chihuahua's sea-blue eyes were narrow and very bright. Even Lum Luckett, stranger to this region, wore an expression of tense expectancy. Then the cowboy jerked his horse to a stop and words came from him in a shaky torrent — "Duke — Rutter — Purcell — six hund'd steers—dead—across the River—" he panted.

"Who's dead? Who's across the River?" roared Givadam.

"Duke an' Rutter an' Purcell was workin' them steers—like you told 'em to—across the Nawth Pasture. Happened, I come back from Yucca early. The steers was gone—you could foller the trail south, easy—an' the boys was all lyin' belly down an' heads twisted around—by their camp. I hightailed for the house an' Miss Margery sent me to catch you!"

"You trail 'em clean to the River? I jist came along it an' I never see a trail," Givadam protested, dazedly.

"Likely, you wasn't far enough west. They crossed at Arroyo Seco, you see. Miss Margery, she's took the boys that's at the house an' gone up to see what she can do."

"Well, let's have a look at things," Slate grunted. "Misery loves company, you know, Givadam. An' the size you are, you're lots o' company."

When they came finally to the camp where the three luckless Lazy-F riders had been killed, they found Margery and four cowboys sitting in a gloomy row, close to where a tarp' covered a still heap. There were tears in the girl's eye-corners. Old Givadam was a good boss. His men stayed

with him and Duke, Rutter and Purcell were fixtures on the Lazy-F. Slate knew that, to the girl, they were like members of the family.

Givadam looked sidewise, uncomfortably, at the silent group. He was the *Jefe,* in border-parlance, the Chief. Those dead men there under the wagon-sheet were something more than his hired hands. They were members of his clan. He had always been proud of the Lazy-F. When rustlers hit at Wolf Wyndam, he had believed that it was because they were afraid to touch *his* outfit. Now— It was his job to smack those who smacked his.

HE went over, very quietly, to lift the tarp'. He stood there for two full minutes, craggy, windburned face working. Then he turned with a snarl, dropping the canvas.

"What y' waitin' for?" he demanded of the four punchers beside Margery. "Let's git the pot to b'ilin'. Find out somethin' about this business. Git ready to show 'em what happens when somebody gits gay an' previous with the Lazy-F."

They got up. They knew the old man very well; knew that this was just steam coming out of the safety-valve.

"We be'n up the back-trail a piece," Seguro Stevens drawled. "Back fur enough to see where the thieves come round an' sneaked up on the boys yere. Reckon Duke, he was on gyard. We found him a-settin' over by that rock. Purcell an' Ug Rutter, they was in their hot rolls."

Chihuahua had been moving about, with little whistles and mutterings and hummings. He met Slate's inquiring eyes and nodded slightly. Slate knew that he had discovered the sandaled imprint here, also.

"Same outfit's a-cleanin' you, Givadam," he drawled. "I reckon, now, that the Lazy-F an' the T2 are embarked on one o' them High Finance Competition businesses —to see which one'll go broke first. I still got some hawses. . . . "

"You have—like hell!" Seguro Stevens contradicted him flatly. "That li'l' mess o' stuff—hawse-herd an' aged cows an' steers —you had in the Goblet pasture, they were run off with this bunch from here. I told you I'd be'n up the back-trail a piece. The trail o' yo' stuff—comin' out o' the Goblet pasture—joins up with this bunch o' ours. Reckon the's no augerin' about it, Slate. Yo's went over the River with ours."

"Well! They certainly don't air . . to leave me ary reason to worry!" Slate cried with a bitter grin. "I been[illegible]d I'd end up minus-lackin' my gold tooth-fillin's the which I neveh had none. So . . . "

"Y' want to trail along o' the Lazy-F?" Givadam asked grimly. "We're follerin' this trail—to wherever she leads. We can use y' an' these men o' you's."

CHIHUAHUA had moved in an aimless fashion, back to his calico. He whistled softly to himself and leaned, with eyes roving against the swell-fork of his saddle. Then, with a wriggle like a cat's, he had the .44 carbine out of its saddle-scabbard and leveled over the saddle-tree. The muzzle was trained on that big clump of bush thirty feet beyond the campfire and the tarpaulin-covered bodies.

"You're *please* come out—ni-ice an' slow!" he invited someone behind the greenery, invisible to the others. The lazy drawl ended in a crack like a bull-whip: *"Pronto!* I'm git so dam' tired to hold this Weenchestair . . . "

The Lazy-F punchers; old Givadam; Margery; Slate—all stared from the tall figure rearing above the saddle-tree, to the silent and moveless bushes. Then Chihuahua's long, brown forefinger closed delicately on the carbine's trigger. Twice—so rapidly that the shots were almost like one —the carbine spat a slug into the bushes.

There was a crash and the thud of hoofs, then out came Bill Fryman in one great lunge of his light-bay Pitchfork animal. There was a gaping hole in the crown of his tall white hat. He had a hand on the pearl butt of his Colt. His pallid face was flushed along the cheekbones. But to Slate, the critical-eyed, the Pitchfork owner seemed not so much angry as—startled? Slate grinned inwardly at Fryman's introduction to the suave and winchesterful and deadly Carlos José de Guerra y Morales.

"You— you—you blame' idiot!" Fryman roared. "Free! What's the idea of shooting at me like that—or letting that nitwit do it. I'm a mind to . . . "

"W'at is it you're do, me, I'm wish that you're *do* him," Chihuahua said plaintively. "These wait, she's tear me all up! Why, señor, will you hide behind them

'ush an' watch, so long, so very quiet?'

"Hide? I hide?" Fryman repeated. "I ca[illegible] riding up, Free! Saw your outfit here. Happened to ride so that the bushes covered me. Th[illegible] this fool . . ."

"Pues, Slate, she's them friend of yours?" Chihuahua interrupted him, though addressing Slate Wyndam. "No? *No?* Oh, me, I'm so glad you're say so! For me, I'm not like them hard name, an' w'en I'm not like anything . . ."

He crossed the ground between them at his gliding step. Fryman found himself staring down into the lean face—now very hard; into the sea-blue eyes—that were blazing; into the muzzle of Chihuahua's carbine—that stared him out of countenance.

"Señor, you're come down from your billygoat. You're come apologizing—or shooting. Me, I'm give not the small damn w'at you're do. But—*segur' Miguel!* One thing or them other, you're do!"

"Looky yere!" Givadam exploded, while Fryman glared downward. "Y' can't come no such gunplay on the Lazy-F."

"I'd keep out o' that, if I was you, Givadam," Slate suggested softly. "Looks to me like she's one o' them businesses just as pers'nal as corns—an' apt to hurt yo' ranch-buyin', soft-ridin', bush-hidin' friend just about as much. . . ."

HE swung up on Midnight both quickly and without seeming of quickness. Somehow, Givadam's rush toward Chihuahua was blocked by the long-legged black's movement. Not that Slate even looked down at Givadam. Not he! Instead, he was staring out seraphically across the country. The four Lazy-F men stared owlishly at him, at Givadam, at Chihuahua and the ready-to-explode Bill Fryman. It seemed not to occur to them to back up their boss. For, as Slate had remarked, this was what the Texas cow-country considered a purely personal affair.

"You standing this on your place?" Fryman cried to Free.

Chihuahua's carbine-muzzle lifted and Fryman suddenly shrugged, managed a scornful grin:

"You've got the drop. Have it your own way. You're a gentleman and a scholar. Does that suit you?"

"Fine!" Chihuahua grinned. "For me, I'm prove that you're one—oh, most careful fella, w'at? You're never use them six-shooter except from behind them bush. An' w'en them goings, she's git rough—w'at the hell. You're lay down an' you're eat them crow like she's fried chicken. *Si,* señor! Me, I'm suit just fine. An' now—"

He turned to Givadam and regarded the huge and nearly choking Lazy-F man with black head on one side, blue eyes twinkling sardonically:

"You're take him!" said Chihuahua. "You're take care of him good. If you're not—some ba-ad mans will mabbe cut the tongue out from him one day."

"Y' can hightail off the Lazy-F quick's that pinto'll take y'!" Givadam yapped. "Y' can't come no gunplay on my range, fella! Mister Fryman's a friend o' mine an' . . ."

"Come on, Chihuahua—an' you too, Lum!" Slate grinned. "The's somethin' funny about the Lazy-F's friends, so us pore strugglin' cowfolks, we better hightail before we get started laughin'. Pore as the T2 is, I can't afford to be bustin' a suit o' Booger Reds."

"Y' ain't trailin' with us?" cried Givadam.

"Me? Us? Which I should say not!"

"I'll bring some pitchfork boys and go with you," Fryman said with a significant look at Margery, then at Slate.

Slate found himself seeing red, with that scornful side-glance. It was really nothing to him how friendly the girl and this big Pitchfork man might be. Of course not! But—red he saw, all the same. He looked at Givadam contemptuously:

"Don't like yo' company a-tall! If we should go wi' you, we'd be scared o' gettin' stabbed in the back—by a Pitchfork, you know . . . You see, Givadam, for a fella that just ambled up behind that bush yonder, an' never stopped, but was comin' on right into the open when Chihuahua opened up with the carbine—well, seems to me, Givadam, he knows a sight too much about all we was talkin' about when he wasn't here! You think that over a spell, Givadam, while you' restin'—yo' brains!"

"Yaaaaiiiah!" Chihuahua yelled, swinging up. And with Lum Luckett and Slate echoing the yell, the T2 rode off at pelting gallop, toward the Goblet waterhole.

V

IT was true enough what Seguro Stevens had said. The little bunch of stuff which had been pasturing around the Goblet was gone. They had followed its back-trail from the camp of the dead Lazy-F men. Chihuahua looked at Slate. Lum Luckett made a cigaret and—this time holding in the zebra dun cautiously—flicked a match and set the flame to the end of the brown roll.

"It certainly *is* a plumb-fissiparous-endothelium!" he said judiciously. "Do' 'no' when I see one obsolescenter!"

"How you-all fixed for shells?" asked Slate. Chihuahua grinned widely. For he understood that the question was in a way Slate's answer to the whole problem.

"Plenty!" said he and Lum together. Slate nodded.

"Same here! We'll do our own followin'. You know, I'm somehow feelin' suspicious about that Fryman fella. He may be all right in his way, but somethin' tells me he's gettin' in my way."

"Segur' Miguel!" Chihuahua nodded owlishly. "Me, I'm see that, too. You're see her, too, Lum? W'en them fella, she's goggle at my girl. I'm feel like that."

"It's plumb downright egregious," Lum agreed. "Sho' is!"

"The both of you will kindly go to hell!" Slate grinned, but with cheeks reddening. "What I mean is, he's been after my place. Botherin' me to sell out, cheap. An' all the time my outfit's worth less and less. He's a fella we do'no' in this country. Do' no' where he hails from—or why. He's had the old Pitchfork less'n two year. Mind! I'm not accusin' him o' this rustlin'. But I do feel like he knows somethin'."

They rode by obscure trails, back to the River. They looked particularly for sign of the Lazy-F men crossing, but could not find it. So, after dark, they rode through the wide, sandy bed, fording knee deep pools, at a little used ford that Slate knew. Approaching the Mexican bank of the stream, they lifted carbines a trifle. For that blacker line of willow and tornillo and cottonwood might mask a thousand men. But, if it did, the ambushed ones held their hands and let them come. Slate wondered with grim lift of mouth corner if it were possible that this easy entrance were like the mouse's eventless ambling into a tr[illegible]

In the darkness, they turned west, and rode alertly to where the T2 herd from the Little Pasture had trailed across. They could see the gray bulk of the "Pillar"—a great rock on the far bank—even in that dimness. For the River was not wide at this point. It was a natural *vado*—ford.

CHIHUAHUA picked up the trail of the stolen herd. They rode pretty slowly, for they did not want to be led aside by the tracks of wandering cattle. Presently, from where he rode head, Chihuahua grunted. A peculiar sound. Slate spurred up beside him. Chihuahua was humming thoughtfully to himself.

"Amigo mio," he drawled. "Them cow, she's come straight south—for a while. Now, she's turn straight west. *Porqúe?* For why? Some Mexican ranch close by?"

"Uh-uh. Pitchfork's got a sizable range on this side, just south o' their range on the Texas side. Quite a ways yet, to that. But the rest o' this range is owned by Mex' outfits 'way south. Hardly ever any o' their stuff up this far, except strays that drift north. You see—there's some cowmen in Texas that wouldn't be above changin' the nationality o' what cows they might see close to the River on this side . . ."

"Pitchfork," Chihuahua said in meditative tone. "Hmmm! Well, we're ride on, hah? Mabbe we're find somethin' ni-ice."

The trail wound in and out, on the edge of the bosque, after a while. For steadily, it angled north toward the River. Slate, bringing up the procession's rear, knew instinctively every landmark they reached. So he knew where they were when he heard the calico's shoes clink for the first time on rocks.

"Gettin' close to Arroyo Seco—an' the trail o' Givadam's stuff an' mine from the Goblet," he muttered. "Now, we are due to see if all the stuff they run across went on west or if they was just usin' the bosque for a cover an' turned south from the arroyo . . . Mr. Fryman, I am goin' to be right interested in findin' that out, too. I—"

There was the faintest of whizzing sounds almost against his face. Automatically, his head jerked sidewise, toward the boulder he was passing. Then a rope set-

tled about his neck; he flung up his hea[illegible]t the bight of the rope was jerked tigh[illegible] the loop closed on his throat. He was pun[illegible]l sidewise out of the saddle and landed heavily on his head.

It was like diving into a pitchy black pool and swimming through it for an endless period. Even when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. Instantly, he knew that something was rammed hard into his mouth. A wad of something pressed against his tongue. He tried to lift his hand, to jerk it out, but his wrists were lashed together behind his back. His ankles were also coupled. He had been most efficiently trussed up.

He could only wonder who had roped him from the saddle. He spent some time in this occupation. There was no sound near him for a long time. He lay on the ground, he knew. When a pebble bit into his side, he moved a little and someone came from a few paces distant to kick him and command silence. It was a Mexican —a *vaquero* or *peon,* by the voice.

TIME dragged on, until the sky lightened in the east. With the gray light, two Mexicans came up. They were ordinary *vaqueros* and they grinned a shade maliciously down at the bound Texan.

"You are comfortable?" one said. The other laughed:

"He will not be troubled long. When Manuel and the horses come— It is too bad that his horse ran away. There must have been a rifle on the saddle. But the pistols, Juan, they are not bad, no?"

He saw that each had one of his Colts. Saw, too, that he lay very near to where he had been hauled out of the saddle. This was that rocky section near the Arroyo Seco. He wondered where Chihuahua and Lum Luckett might be. They would have missed him pretty quickly, he thought. Perhaps the Mexicans had thought of that. Hence the careful gagging.

"The *Jefe* is a great man," said Juan, watching Slate. He was a fat-faced fellow, with twinkling, beady eyes. "He must have some good plan, or he would not make so much trouble for us. If he had not wanted this *gringo,* we could have finished him with a knife, most quietly, most easily."

The other rider nodded, grinning. Then both turned. For horses were approaching. Five Mexicans rode up and reined in their scrubby mounts, to look down at Slate and grin. He gathered from their talk that Juan and his companion had been left to watch the trail, with orders to capture anybody who came along. So his capture had been more or less a matter of accident—it might just as well have been Chihuahua or Lum whom the waiting Mexicans lassoed.

They put him on a horse, unlashing his feet and relashing them with a rawhide rope under the animal's belly. Then with one Mexican riding behind another, the group turned west and into the dense thickness of the bosque. An hour or more of jogtrotting brought them to an adobe house. It was so set in the thick-grown greenery as to be almost invisible at thirty yards. It was gained by narrow paths.

Before it they halted and untied Slate's feet. He was carried inside and now the gag was jerked from his mouth. Juan grinned at him, in fashion neither friendly nor the reverse. About as he might have grinned at a slick-ear in a butcher's corral, knowing that it was merely veal on the hoof. Slate returned his grin as well as swollen lips would let him.

"Well, what next?" he asked huskily. "Got anything to eat in this place? And what are we waiting for?"

"For the *Jefe,*" Juan shrugged. "Yes, you can have something to eat. The *Jefe* may not come for hours—or he may come in five minutes. So—I will bring you something."

VI

TWILIGHT came. More and more nervous, moody, the Mexicans seemed. Slate, sitting with hands unbound and back to the 'dobe wall of the house, thinking frantically, wondered if this growing tension were caused by expectancy. They were very afraid of their leader—no doubt of that! And if he were due, they would naturally be nervous. He speculated about that leader—his identity. A name and a face were in his mind, for all that he had no real reason to suspect Bill Fryman. No reason beyond instinctive dislike.

"Does seem kind o' funny, too," he told himself, "that he'd come around offerin'

to *buy* the outfit, when all he'd have to do —if he's this rustler-chief—would be to keep on stealin' an' then buy the T2 from Diffy at a dime on the dollar. An' yet—all this stuff was headin' straight for his place. . . . Well—I reckon that puzzle'll come straight soon."

He heard no sounds of anyone approaching. Neither did the Mexicans inside with him, for that matter. But suddenly, in the gloom of the doorway, a man stood sidewise. The room was too dark, now, to let Slate make out more than the squat figure and the somewhat paler blob that was his face. The Mexicans came swiftly to their feet with little grunts. They stood stiffly, watching, seeming to wait.

"Well!" Slate cried cheerfully. "You're just in time to see what the neighbors brought in—that is, if we're eatin' tonight. Yo' boys told me early this mawnin' that you'd be here inside five minutes—or five days."

"Who is he?" the man demanded in Spanish, of the Mex' guards. There was something almost familiar about his voice, Slate thought—then dismissed the fancy. For there was nothing at all familiar about the squat, wide figure.

Antonio explained respectfully. He was shrewd, this fellow. He had proved his cautiousness when he halted the more irritable Juan's reckless talk. He told the silent figure there in the door that he believed their prisoner to be no common cowboy, but the owner of the T2 outfit.

"Are you Wolf Wyndam's son?" the man demanded of Slate.

"My goodness! Is that a crime?" Slate inquired—for the man had spat the question in tones venomed beyond belief. "You know, you have certainly got me guessin'—had me spinnin' my loop an' tryin' to heel idees all day, for that matter: What you figured to make by havin' these boys yank me out o' the saddle is more'n I can guess. If they'd shot at me, I'd understood the said maneuvers. But you have acted like you knew as much about T2 affairs as I myself could—more, until lately!"

"Perhaps not a crime . . ." the man said slowly, still in that malignant tone that somehow made Slate's not-particularly sensitive spine crinkle. "But—very unfortunate, for you!"

HE came into the room, snapping command at Juan for light. [illegible] brought a tallow candle in a beer [illegible]tle. With its flickering flame, Slate looked at the Mexicans' leader—and gasped. He had been a big man, once! No[illegible] large as the gigantic Givadam Free—[illegible]t so tall, at any rate—but enormously wide; tremendously thick of chest. Now . . .

He was incredibly stooped—from the waist. *And his head was twisted around like that of a dead cowboy.* Almost, he looked over his shoulder. He never moved the flannel-swathed neck. The big head was moveless as he glared at Slate with deep-set black eyes that burned red under the shaggy gray-black brows.

He was a breath-taking figure. He reminded Slate of a gorilla he had seen once in the zoo of an Eastern city—a gorilla maddened and glowering out through thick bars. Only—here were no bars between them! Slate studied the great vulture-like beak of a nose that overhung the thinnest gash of a mouth he had ever seen. Not one trace of human kindness in that deep-lined, fish-belly-colored face! None.

"Fifteen years ago, Wolf Wyndam came into Chihuahua to buy cattle. He and Free of the Lazy-F. We quarreled and —I was left like this. A cripple! Doomed to creep through life with my neck in a steel brace. For years I could not even creep. *But I could keep track of Wolf Wyndam and Free!"*

There was a forced represssion about him that was worse, even, than the most violent, maniacal, rage. Slate, sitting with back to the wall, almost holding his breath while he fairly gaped at this figure out of a nightmare, expected the Man with the Twisted Neck to fly into a screaming, slavering fury. Expected him to lunge forward—as that gorilla had lunged against the bars—to scratch and bite. And as he waited stiffly, he almost wished that the man *would* break that deadly grip he had on himself!

"Wolf Wyndam cheated me, by dying. But I intended wiping out the whole clan! If he had fathered twenty daughters, I would have strangled every one of them. It happens that you were his only child —oh, I kept track of you, too! I knew that you were gone. Knew that you were coming back. Knew when you came. I

d years to think of all this. So . . ." [illegible]veat burst out upon that yellow-white for[illegible]ad; his face twisted almost out of [illegible]uman semblance; a reddish froth sprang [illegible] his lips. Huge yellow hands lifted and twitch[illegible] and curled spasmodically—and still the [illegible]at head was moveless in the grip of the steel cradle. He staggered aimlessly, seeming not to go toward any particular place or thing, but only to lurch about to keep from fall[illegible]g.

AT last, the Man with the Twisted Neck slumped against a wall and leaned there, breath coming in hoarse gasps. Slate had recovered use of his quite matter-of-fact mind. He dismissed the idea of the uncanny. This hairpin was just a dangerous creature; gone crazy on the idea of revenge. But in other times, other places, Slate Wyndam had faced cold-eyed and merciless killers; gambled his life against theirs and found a way to offset their superior speed at gunplay. So. . . .

"If one o' the boys come inside arm-reach with one o' my hoglegs on, I'll show this fella some smoke—an' finish up what Dad never finished like he should have, that time in Chihuahua!" he told himself grimly. He watched carefully and closely through slitted lids the recovery of the twisted one.

"Where is The Twister?" the outlaw demanded of his men, coming out of the dusky corner where he had been leaning on the wall. "Speak! Speak quickly when I ask a question or— Where is The Twister? I have work for him to do—now!"

"Pardon, *patron!*" Antonio said meekly. "But The Twister went away yesterday, early—no more than half an hour after you had gone. I think he has a woman somewhere. I told him that you had given no permission for any to leave this place but—he growled like the bear he is and walked toward me with those huge hands up, so—"

"Ah!" said the Man with the Twisted Neck. "The Twister needs a lesson. . . . Let none of you think that it will not be given. The man who is not at my hand when I need him—"

"We know, *patron!*" they cried in nervous chorus. "We know! We remember the brothers at Granadilla! We will be ready, always, *patron!*"

"This one here is the son of my enemy. He dies, this evening! I would have twisted his head about like those heads of the others, with my other hands. Then I would have laid him in the road for all to see. But The Twister is not here—as he will wish he had been. So— Take him down into the bosque; you, Antonio! Juan! Gregorio! Primitivo! Let him dig his grave—it need not be too deep—then kill him and put him in it. Where is his horse? I will send it back to the other side with stirrups reversed—to show the rider's end. . . ."

"It ran away, *patron!*" said Juan quickly. "Antonio's loop dropped over this one's head and we jerked. The great black he rode dashed off to westward and outdistanced my horse in a jump, almost. It was a magnificent *caballo;* my poor scrub had no chance with it."

THREE of the men designated as his murderers came over and jerked him roughly to his feet. Juan and the man Gregorio held him by the wrists. Primitivo, one-eyed and ferociously scarred, of gaunt face, slashed the rope that bound Slate's feet. Then he laid the edge of the long blade lightly against Slate's throat. He drew it sidewise ever so delicately and instinctively Slate flinched from the sting of the skin-deep cut. Primitivo's one eye glared up almost as redly as his master's.

"That, *chucho Americano,* is the way you will go!" he snarled. "By the knife of Primitivo!"

They hustled him outside, past the Man with the Twisted Neck, so that, even if he had been minded to try argument or persuasion, there was no time. Antonio, with one of Slate's Colts importantly in his hand, an old shovel over his shoulder, led the way. Juan, too, had a Colt in his left hand, the other of Slate's pair.

They took him over a soft bosque-trail that led toward the river. Juan and Gregorio gripped his wrists tightly, Primitivo brought up the rear, pinking Slate with knife-point. They came to a little clearing, perhaps twenty-by-twenty feet. Antonio stopped and looked with solemn face at Slate.

"Do you like this place?" he asked. "Do

not say so unless it suits perfectly. For you will be here a long while, *gringo!* I think that it is good enough."

Slate said nothing. He was too desperately looking for a way out. But both Juan and Antonio were close against him with the muzzles of his own pistols trained on him, while Primitivo's knife-point rested lightly against his back. He laughed abruptly, a harsh, contemptuous sound that brought nods of approval from this experienced audience. No man faces death, or dies, more calmly, contemptuously, than the Mexicans. They had been wondering how he would act—just as they would have watched a strange bullfighter's deportment in the bull-ring.

"The shovel!" he said mockingly. "Give it me. Time spent in such mangy company as this is like time endured among scabrous, cringing curs of the alley. The smell of you is an offense in the nostrils of a man. Buzzards you are, cowering before a crippled, helpless shadow of a man. Because, shadow though he is, he is yet the shadow of a Man! None of you could be mistaken for so much as a man's shadow! There is not that much of the man about you—fleas; lice; things lower, even, than those! Give me the shovel!"

PRIMITIVO snarled furiously. The others, too, moved as if they would not wait for the grave to be dug. But Antonio checked them, crying out that what the *patron* had ordered must be done —to the last and smallest detail. For he would be furious over the disobedience of The Twister and in no mood to overlook even the smallest insubordination. Sullenly they ringed themselves around Slate, who spat and took the shovel.

It bit easily into the soft alluvial soil of the river-bottom. Two big chunks of black earth came up. Then he uncovered a stratum of sand. He laid his shovel down and began scooping up sand with cupped hands. He straightened—and flung the sand with a fanwise motion into their faces. He had the shovel and had hurled himself upon them while their eyes were still filled with the sand. Primitivo went down with a tremendous blow of the shovel-edge, which cut his wicked little head almost in halves.

Juan and Antonio pulled back the hammers instinctively and the bullets sang away past Slade. He swung the shovel furiously sidewise and chopped back at Antonio's neck. Juan, who had not been so much blinded as the others, gripped the pistol with both hands and lifted it. Slate stooped and snatched up the Colt Antonio had dropped. He fell flat, on his side, and twice flipped back the big hammer. Juan's knees buckled and his head went back with the impact of the heavy slugs in his stomach. Mouth gaping, he crashed flat as Slate fired the two remaining shots into the back of Gregorio—who had but a knife and a burning desire to get away from that shambles.

"W'at the hell!" cried Chihuahua Joe, coming around the corner of the path into the clearing and reining in. *"Por dios! Por dios!* An' we're come to help you! Oh, w'at the hell She's more fair that we're come an' help *these fella,* Lum!"

Slate gaped at them. He was panting from the fury of his attack on the four. And the appearance of the two friends was so unexpected—and then he grinned flashingly. For it was *not* unexpected! Not the arrival of this pair. They were merely bearing out his opinion of them, formed at the time of meeting each. Two men to tie to.

"Oh! So you caught Midnight, huh?" he asked of Chihuahua.

"We're find him in them bosque, three-four hour ago. She's graze. One dam' fine horse, Slate, *segur' Miguel.* W'en daylight's come today, we're miss you. We're back-track an' we're find them place where you're come out from the saddle like them small green frog hop from river-bank. We're pick up them trail, but lose him; pick him up; lose him—all day. An' then we're hear them shot an'—*aqui estamos!* We're here!"

"Pleased to meet you!" Slate said humorously. "Now . . ."

He swung up on Midnight and whipped the carbine from the saddle-scabbard and threw back the lever.

"I've got a li'l' bitty call to make," he said with deadly evenness. "Yes, sir! On the hairpin that's been twistin' necks around the Yucca country. He can't have more'n five o' his men with him; he come up to the house a while back an' brought along a couple. An' these I laid

out here'll kind o' put a crimp in that ou
a spell."

Chihuahua lagged behind for two minutes, when Slate led the way back toward the house in the bosque. He caught up with him at tearing gallop, humming a tender love song:

"Me, I'm like to see if them fella on our back-trail, they're good dead," he said softly. *"Pues*—they're good dead. . . ."

VII

IT was almost dark. On the thicknesses of the bosque the shadows deepened on the narrow trails. They grunted to each other, then parted by the tunnel-like stock-paths to "round up" the house. Slate rode quietly, alertly, forward. Suddenly, he heard the *whang-whang-whang!* of a Winchester—two Winchesters!

He spurred forward and mechanically bent lower in the saddle. Something whispered past his face while the metallic clatter of the firing sounded well over on his left. A willow branch dropped from a sapling. A stray slug, he guessed. But with the second whispering of a bullet, he changed his mind and, low over the horn, surged into the brush, off-trail.

"Where's that gunie shootin' from?" he asked himself scowlingly. "The bullets come from a way off an' how anybody could see this trail an' us, Midnight, at that distance—"

He found the sniper after a while—in a high cottonwood no more than a hundred yards away; a cottonwood that towered high above the low growth of the delta. And he remembered that huge tree; it was in the very dooryard of the 'dobe house. He watched the bushwhacker, who had transferred his attention to other sectors of this battlefield. When the fellow exposed himself in taking aim, Slate's bullets slapped the tree all around him. He jerked back, then leaned forward and came out of the tree's gnarled fork precisely as a sack of meal might have toppled, arms and legs flailing limply.

Slate moved cautiously forward along this trail, toward the great cottonwood and the house. He heard firing, now—and from different points. Apparently, the Man with the Twisted Neck had more of a gang than he had expected.

FOR all the noise of the distant fight in his ears, he heard a soft swishing of the bushes on his left. Very slowly, he turned that way, looking under Midnight's belly. And in a tiny clearing, he glimpsed for an instant a creeping figure. He fired twice—as he might have shot at a deer breaking cover. The figure disappeared and at that instant, all shooting stopped. Slate's ears seemed to ring with the very silence. Faintly, there sounded that strange, high, thin yell he had heard once before—by the dead fire in the Little Pasture of the T2—wordless, yet plainly a summons.

He heard rustling in the brush from three points around him. It died away. He expelled his breath in a great sigh of relief. Those fellows had been creeping up on him and, until they gave away their positions, he had not known of two! A narrow squeak! He stood up and put the split-reins over Midnight's neck. For he had perfect confidence in the departure of the Mexicans. They had vanished as into thin air, as in the fight by the water-hole in Little Pasture, with that yell of their leader. He took it for granted that it would be the same here.

So, it was almost carelessly that he rode toward the 'dobe house. It was getting very dusky. But he saw a man appear beside the house and automatically whipped up carbine and drove a bullet toward the shadowy figure. The man dropped and merged with the ground in the gloom. He yelled:

"Hey, Slate! It's me—Chihuahua!"

Slate rode out into the little clearing that held the house. Chihuahua's teeth flashed. He had been inside, he said. The gang had gone—pellmell, to vanish in a twinkling. There was nothing to do, before morning.

"Don't tell *me* the's nothin' to do!" cried Lum Luckett indignantly. He materialized in the doorway behind Chihuahua.

"Them bushwhackers folded up like a ol' maid's umbrella; I was down behind a big cottonwood, a-powderin' 'em through a crotch. Got one or two I know about. Then somebody give a funny yell an' they cut stick out o' that like—like a light somebody'd blowed out."

"She's that way with me, too," Chihua-

hua nodded. "Me, I'm tie my calico back in them willow; I'm go on *-por pie;* by foot—an' I'm make nois like cloud-shadows on them ground. I'm find one man w'at will wait an' see who will come by them path. Then—" he grinned sardonically "—me, I'm throw little stick up an' hit them alamito leaves over his head. She's look up—an' me, I'm throw my knife in the throat."

They left the house and Chihuahua led the way into the bosque's depth. He halted in a clearing three miles or more to westward and made a tiny fire. While Lum cooked bacon and warmed black beans and made coffee, Chihuahua and Slate acted as guards, roving quietly back and forth about the camp. When they had eaten, they mounted again and this time rode southward to get out of the bosque. They halted on open ground and staked out the horses.

TWICE that night, Chihuahua waked and touched the others. It was not coyote-howls, this time—as at the camp in the Little Pasture. He confessed that he could not say what particular sound waked him. But he was restless; uneasy. When Slate waked with dawn, Chihuahua sat like a statue with his beloved carbine across his knees, his hat upon it. The ground about was littered with cigaret stubs. He grinned:

"Me, I'm all Navajo last night. Something's come on the night-wind, Slate. What *Quien sabe? Quien sabe?* But she's bad. So I'm sit an' watch an' listen an' smoke them cigaret under my hat an' think about them people of my mother."

He got up and stretched like a wolf. While Lum made a fire and Slate started the cooking, Chihuahua went sniffing around the camp. He yelled fiercely and they dropped wood and food and ran to him. On a bare stretch, he showed them the traces left by two men moving with steps of the shortest. Then the spot where these silent ones had dropped to hands and knees. Slate clicked tongue against teeth:

"Did anybody *ever* see paws like those!" he grunted.

Flat on the ground the huge hands had rested. Calculation of the distance between prints of knees and impressions of hands, made Slate believe that this one who had stalked their fire so cautiously was as a man as big as Givadam Free, ever—and with hands of a size that made Givadam's woman-small, by contrast. The hand-prints were far apart, too, showing tremendous width of shoulders.

"*Pues,* them .44 slug, she's [illegible] *Gigante,* them giant, dead like [illegible] one baby on the squaw's back!" Chihuahua grinned, quite unimpressed.

They had breakfast and Chihuahua shook his head again and again. He was irritated because those two stalkers had come so close to him without making a sound he could hear. He rode at the head of their file when they turned west after the meal and headed for the place where the trail of the stolen herd had died out on hard, rocky ground. The last traces Chihuahua could find seemed to point southwest, away from the river.

"Plumb zygophyllaceous," Lum drawled. "But I was always one to believe firm in the healin' effects o' hot lead-liniment—ambidextrously laid on."

VIII

THEY skirted the rocky scope of country in which the trail of the T2 herd had vanished. Riding fifty yards apart and keeping roughly abreast, one of the other, they could see a great deal of country. Chihuahua it was—with his roving eyes seeming to see everything at once—who found almost in the same instant the track of a slowly ridden horse and glimpsed ahead of them the horse itself. And its rider. . . .

It was a smallish, slim-figured Mexican in great umbrella-like sombrero. He had topped out of an arroyo and, warned, it seemed, by the instinct of wild animals and wild men, turned to see who might follow on his back-trail. He was perhaps two hundred yards away, when they saw him, a fierce, graceful statue of the horseman. Then he had ducked low over his animal's neck and his elbows came out and his heels dug in. He was gone like a scared wolf.

"Yeeeeooooow!" Lum Luckett yelled and his evil-faced and evil-mannered dun was in a hard gallop in a jump. Perforce, the others followed.

They thundered across the level and let the horses go down into the arroyo hit-or-

tumble, pellmell. They were border at[illegible] als, all, else one at least would hav[illegible] ken a neck. But with feet hunched like dro[illegible]ing cats, down they came into the [illegible]cky arroyo-floor; across it in a couple of gi[illegible]umps; then scrambling—like cats again[illegible]he slanting far bank.

But the [illegible] hundred yards separating them from th[illegible] fugitive had stretched by fifty yards. He [illegible] riding fast, that Mexican. Chihuahua's [illegible]int surged up alongside Midnight. Chihuahua jerked his head sidewise and grinned at Slate:

"Them boy—ride like—we're—"

He put his fists to his head with forefingers sticking straight into the air. Slate grinned back at him. He understood that Chihuahua implied the *vaquero* believed them to be devils. He shook his head briefly:

"Or like we're *cow-owners*" he said grimly. "Got to heel him. He might be —one o' that gang!"

They gained on him steadily, but so rough was that country over which he rode, that Slate scowled nervously. Too many ways for a fellow who knew the region to dodge away. But Chihuahua yelled abruptly at his stirrup. Slate looked that way and saw Chihuahua jerking his carbine from the scabbard. Then, from full gallop, Chihuahua pulled the paint horse in. Down on its tail the calico sat and Chihuahua was out of the saddle and had raised the Winchester slowly, almost with negligence in the motion. Lum pulled to the side as Slate had done.

Up came the carbine to the shoulder. Chihuahua pressed trigger gently—and again and again and again. The Mexican's horse collapsed as if one of the slugs had shaved its four legs off. Down to its belly it dropped and turned a somersault. The rider came out of the big-horned saddle and turned halfway over in air. Slate charged down on him.

THE boy—for he was hardly more than that—had lifted himself on an elbow. He stared stupidly up at Slate—with his hand creeping toward the open front of charro-jacket. Slate turned his carbine-muzzle a trifle and the hand stopped; Slate moved the muzzle yet more and the hand fell away from knife handle. The *vaquero* was like a wolf in a trap, looking all w[illegible]ys in search of an avenue of escape.

"Who are [illegible]ou?" Slate demanded, in Spanish.

"Segundo Navarrez, a cowboy of the Pitchfork," the *vaquero* said without seeming interested. "And you— You are—"

"Well? Who are we?" Slate inquired. "Why did you run away and make it necessary for us to kill your pony?"

"This is not a region in which one stops to talk with everyone who comes—not if one wishes to eat his *frijoles* the next meal. You appeared where honest men are not expected to be—just after my *patron* and the great Geevadam of the Lazy-F had ridden over the river hunting thieves. Even now . . ."

Slate's face showed nothing of his thoughts. He turned to Chihuahua and Lum, who had come up and sat their horses to stare down at the dusty *vaquero*. But out of the corner of an eye he watched this youth. For if he knew Givadam Free and the Lazy-F, certainly he knew the T2. And he had looked at Midnight's brand even before he hinted that they might not be honest men. He must know that there was none on the T2 to ride an unwanted horse of that brand except Slate Wyndam.

"Your patron rode on with the Lazy-F men?"

"No," the *vaquero* shrugged. "These steers were worth much money. They were very good. Fours up. My *patron* was very angry and he turned back to the Pitchfork. I think that he will go to town and see the sheriff."

"Well—I think that we will do the same," Slate decided. "If we see your Pitchfork steers—"

"They are not branded Pitchfork. My *patron* bought them from someone south of this. They are branded *Très Lirios.*"

"Three Lilies—a Mex' brand," Slate nodded. "All right. Sorry we killed your horse. Tell your *patron* that I will pay him for it. Now, do you want to ride behind me to headquarters on this side and get another mount? Hop up, then."

LUM picked up the saddle when the *vaquero* had stripped it from the dead pony. The youth jumped up behind Slate and Lum carried the saddle. It was five or six miles to the pole-roofed one-room

'dobe that was Pitchfork headquarters over here. The place was on the edge of the bosque, with brush almost up to its walls.

They swung down and looked inside. It was empty, but in a corral behind were three scrubby horses. The boy grinned at them.

"Now, I am all right. I will take one of these horses. For I must ride out again and find those steers."

"We'll have dinner here and then ride across," said Slate.

"If you can stand the fleas—and have food, very well," said the *vaquero*. "When you start for the river, do not try to cross north of this place. Ride back to the east for two miles and you will find our ford. There are quicksands here."

They cooked dinner in the open before the 'dobe, between house and bosque-fringe. The *vaquero* ate with them and talked lazily about thieves along the river. But Slate's questions about the gang of the Man with the Twisted Neck received only shrugs. The boy had heard of the dead men on the T2 and Lazy-F; of the way their necks had been twisted and snapped; but that was all. He had worked Pitchfork cattle on both sides of the river for two years and had never seen any gang.

Chihuahua wandered off, with inevitable cornshuck cigaret and equally inevitable carbine. Slate and Lum lay at full length on the ground. Lum had his hat over his face. Slate stared fixedly at the bosque, smoking, trying to piece together the odds and ends of information he had. The note was due in just twenty-four days, now. . . .

Lum muttered and began scratching himself violently. Slate stared, then grinned, remembering what the *vaquero* had said about fleas. Evidently, they had descended on Lum to the exclusion of the others. He took up his gloomy train of thought again, but only for a split-second. For Lum twitched the Colt from the holster on his right thigh and up it came and roared.

The poles of the 'dobe's roof rustled and crackled but with Lum's second shot the sound ceased. Slate was on his feet and so was the *vaquero*. Slate had his Colts out and was hunting a target. The Mexican had whipped up the long knife with which he had been whittling a stick. He gaped at Slate; at Lum; at the roof. There was a rush of hoofs and Chihuahua tore around the corner of the house on a strange pony.

"Jist one, I 'low," Lum drawled. "An' him too fur gone to be used for anything much. . . . Gi' me a boost up. I'll haul him down out o' that, *amigo!*"

HE stood on Slate's shoulders for a moment and stared, then nodded and hauled away. A thickset Mexican was hauled over the edge of the flat thoroughly dead. With a bullet in the shoulder and another through the head. Slate grunted with sight of him. It was one of the riders who had been in the house in the bosque; one of the men of the twisted-necked one.

"He was jist ready to crack down on us," Lum drawled. "Me, I was half-asleep, but somethin' bothered me; I declare I felt plumb oxidized I looked out from under my John B. an' I saw this *hombre* liftin' up his knife an' lookin' at the house. So I looked up an' I could see somethin' that looked plenty like a pistol, for me. I begun scratchin' till I got my hand to my gun an'—that's that! Yuh hear him, too, boy?"

"Sí, señor," the *vaquero* nodded. "But—my knife would have been nothing against his pistol. You are most quick!"

"Me, I'm find his horse," Chihuahua grinned. "I'm wander around, for fun. I'm like Lum, I'm feel ox—; however Lum's feel, that's me, too. An' I'm find these horse tied in them bosque. So, I'm bring him an' I'm wonder where them fella is."

"You know the man?" Slate asked the *vaquero*.

"No. He is not a man of this part of the river. Perhaps he came up, looking for food. When we rode up, he had not time to get back to his horse. So he climbed to the roof and . . ."

"Likely enough. Well, I know him! He belongs to this gang we're going to wipe out. Well? S'pose we cut stick. This ford, *hombre*, is two miles east? And there's none along here?"

"Sí, señor. No, *señor.* The ford is about two miles and there is no other ford safe to try, closer."

They rode off, leaving the dead man of the gang where Lum had dropped him.

They went cautiously along the bosque's edge. They rode a mile; two miles. There was no sign of a ford. Another mile more slowly. Still no ford. A fourth mile and then they looked thoughtfully at each other and turned back. They studied the banks carefully; followed some cow-trails into the depths and came back out. For nowhere was there sign of a crossing. They came back to the 'dobe. It was deserted—and the body that had been on the ground before it was gone.

Chihuahua grunted and pointed to the ground. They swung down with him and stared at the hoofprints. Three horses had come out of the bosque. Sandaled men had picked up the dead one and put him across a saddle. Then the little cavalcade had gone back into the quiet, sinister depths of the bosque. But a fourth horse had been ridden away westward. Chihuahua shook his head slowly and turned to Slate with one corner of his mouth lifted sardonically.

"She's ride ver' fast, them boy—an' she's ride away after them fella pick up Lum's dead one. . . . Lum! You're say them boy, she's got knife up w'en you're first look, huh? Me, I'm think she's ready to throw them knife—at your neck! They're figure—them boy an' them fella up there—they're down you, Slate, and git Lum, too! Then me, w'en I'm come back. Me, I'm think them boy one—dam'—fine—liar! *Pues,* she's fool me!"

"He sent us wild-goosin' after a ford that ain't, all right," Slate nodded. "Let's trail after him an' see if we can find out why he was so anxious to have us out o' the way two-three hours. That reason might happen to be just as interestin' to us as it ever could be to him."

"Or to his boss, yuh reckon?" Lum Luckett drawled meaningly.

IX

THEY followed the hard-punched trail of the *vaquero's* galloping pony across grassy flats and alkali-whitened reaches. But when the boy's tracks turned into the myriad paths of the bosque, Slate shook his head and continued in the open. No hope of making speed in that green wilderness—even if they did not ride straight into ambush. He trusted in finding something interesting out in the open pastures.

Something interesting they did find—two cows six or seven years old; ordinary range stock; both wearing an odd three-part brand. Only when they rode up close did Slate nod understanding. The three blotches on the left side were three fleur-de-lis irons —the *Très Lirios,* Three Lilies, of which the *vaquero* had spoken.

Chihuahua had taken down his rope and now pushed the calico forward. Deftly, he shook out a small loop and dropped it over a cow's head. The calico moved away, keeping the cow at the end of stiffened rope. Chihuahua swung down and went close. He eyed the three lilies with head on one side.

"Heel her, Slate!" he grunted, with odd tone. "We're see. . . ."

Slate caught the cow by a heel and threw here. They inspected the brand closely. The first fleur-de-lis was cleanly burned, but the remaining pair — Slate's eyes began to flame. It was a well-aged brand, but there was that about part of the second and third lilies which seemed older. Chihuahua nodded, muttering to himself.

"Me, I'm them expert on blottin'! I'm work in them dam' Territory w'en Frenchy Leonard, she's ride waitin' for them bullet of Lit Taylor; with them long rope an' them hungry loop. I'm see *bastante*-plenty burned brands, them days. An' Slate! These sweet, lovely *très lirios,* they're look to me like—"

With a twig, he sketched the T2 brand in the dust at his feet. Then, swiftly, he drew a fleur-de-lis to left of it. He looked up, blue eyes twinkling sardonically, at his audience, before making with a half-dozen quick, sure motions, a second and third lily to cover the T2.

"Then Fryman's been buyin' from the thieves, if nothin' else!" Slate snarled. "When I meet that gent' again, I'll certainly be loose-holstered for his special benefit. Listen! Let's drive this cow across with us an' show her to some folks in Yucca. There's nothin' like a walkin' picture o' what you mean, to make things plain. So we'll take her over an'—"

THREE or four rifles barking suddenly interrupted him. Automatically, the three of them sprang to their horses. Lead

pocked the ground near where they had squatted by the thrown cover. Puffs of dust rose like the jets of a fountain. Neither Chihuahua nor Slate tried throwing off the loop of his lariat. Chihuahua merely cast loose his dallies. Slate, whose rope-end was tied to his saddle-horn Texas-style, whipped out his knife and slashed the manila in two. For the rifle fire came closer —and deepened. The riflemen themselves were covered by the brush.

"We got to hightail or they'll hang our hides to the fence!" Slate yelled. Then the three surged into the bosque with lead drumming at the horses' heels.

They sent the animals sliding into the shallows and splashing across. They struck no soft spots. But when they were almost at the American bank, the rifles began to bark behind them from the bosque's fringe. Bullets skipped across the water, or thudded into the sandy Texas shore. They rammed in the hooks and scrambled up. In an instant, they were covered by a willow-clump.

"Yucca-bound, with our hair in a braid!" Slate said curtly. "I reckon maybe that *vaquero* o' Fryman's told us that much truth; reckon Fryman did turn back an' head for Yucca."

They rode fast until they came to the road from the Lazy-F to town—then rode faster. They slowed down on the edge of Yucca and entered at an easy fox-trot.

HAPPY JACK'S saloon was midway between the ends of the main street. The sheriff's office was at the far end of town. So, if Bertie and his faithful "Low Pockets" were not moving about town, there was a good chance of finding Fryman before the sheriff found him. He looked in over the swinging doors that were the pride of Happy Jack's heart. No sign of Bertie Drain, but there was Fryman, leaning on the bar not eight feet away—and staring straight at him. So Slate walked in. Lum Luckett trailed him.

Inside, when his eyes refocused, Slate saw that Squints Agee and Feathers Flint were at a table at the saloon's far end, playing stud with some townsmen and traders. They were both sitting with backs to the barroom. Fryman nodded impassively to Slate.

"You said somethin' a while back, about buyin' me out," Slate drawled—in almost a humble tone.

"Not interested—now," Fryman said boredly and turned away, facing the bartender. "That Three-Bar barbecue" [illegible] your trade, Jack. Everybody [illegible]ng, it would seem. Yucca will be dead enough to bury for two days. I can't . . ."

"Why," said Slate slowly, slowly, "I figured different. I figured that a man who'd buy *Très Lirios* stuff'd just—about—buy anything. . . . Funny—but I did!"

"No difference to me what you figured —or figure," Fryman shrugged, without turning. "I buy what, when, or where I choose. *Très Lirios* or old Manuel Garcia's *Hemisferio* stuff."

Slate had no idea whether or not Fryman had holstered a Colt under his arm —as he, himself, had done. He looked over at Squints and Feathers. They had dropped their stud-hands and stared at him balefully. Lum moved over a little, to be more plainly seen. Slate looked back at Fryman:

"I do'no' this *Très Lirios* outfit. . . . Is all their stuff branded Three Lilies—over my T2?"

As Fryman's calmness persisted, Slate lost control of himself. He glared at the big, impassive figure:

"You're either a cow-thief or buyin' off the thieves!" he snarled—and stepped in like a flash. His fist hooked up and over and he had the soul-satisfying experience of feeling his hard knuckles smash against Fryman's nose and chin.

Fryman's head snapped back—but he knew something! His guard came up instinctively and Slate's left landed on a forearm. Then Fryman swung at him in quick alternation and there was no calmness about his pallid face now! He was snarling and he pushed forward at Slate with a sort of confident eagerness that Slate read instantly. Fryman expected to hammer him.

HE slid back and sidewise. Fryman's long, straight right met nothing more solid than the smoke of Lum Luckett's cigaret. Slate pivoted and hung a healthy right under the big man's ear. Fryman's head went sidewise and Slate rushed in, throwing both fists. Fryman went

down to his knees and Slate stepped back. He heard Lum talking to someone—Squints and Feathers, he guessed. The tubby ex-Ranger's drawl was both low and thoroughly audible:

"Couldn't try that, if I was yuh-all. It'd be plumb serious. I'm certain it would. A metaphorical yuh'd both have to go see a doctor—or a undertaker. Yo' boss has just got to take his medicine an' lick the spoon. Yuh-all mustn't crowd around his bedside so. . . ."

Fryman came up, blood-streaked face twisted in a deadly mask. He fairly hurled himself at Slate, who met him with a torrid straight right and a sizzling left hook. But Fryman flung his long arms around the smaller man. Slate made no effort to break that grip. Instead of useless struggling, he dropped his head against Fryman and battered the Pitchfork owner in the midriff. Those drumming punches, that traveled no more than five or six inches, were packed with high explosive. Fryman tried to lock his arms around Slate's, but when he shifted his hold, Slate thanked him for the opportunity and whipped up alternating uppercuts to the chin.

He was conscious of a jumble of movement around him. Men were crowding up close as he lowered his sights again and whipped in half-arm jolts to the stomach—right; left, right; left— He had no time to worry about those around him. He had Fryman beaten by virtue of beating him to the first and successive punches. He had not taken a square blow from the big Pitchfork man. He had given Fryman no chance to set himself for a blow—or land one, even if Fryman had got set.

"You're—such a pretty boy!" he snarled at Fryman. "You—won't feel so cocky—next time—maybe! Buy my—cows—will you! Or—steal' em! The T2—is sittin' up—an' takin' nourishment! An' this is—just a beginnin'!"

But it was at least the ending of that session. He was fighting like a wild man. Always fast—for the terrific hitter he was—today he fought the best battle of his life and knew it. Fryman was merely a battered, bloody hulk, held swaying on his feet by innate vitality. But even that could endure the merciless hammering only so long. He was long past ability to even try fighting back. Slate stepped back and someone tripped him. As he recovered, he saw a shadowy figure fall flat almost at his side.

IN he went and measured Fryman. Flashingly, he set himself and looped an overhand right to Fryman's chin; shifted feet and hooked a terrific left to the same target. Fryman came falling forward slackly. Slate stepped back and watched him collapsing like a fallen jumping-jack, arms and legs thrashing out limply. Then he turned to blink at those around him. He was breathing in great, agonized gasps, but otherwise he was undamaged.

Lum Luckett he saw first—standing over Feathers Flint, who sprawled on the floor in very much the same condition as his boss. Lum had his arm through that of Squints Agee—but, somehow, Slate had no idea that this was a fraternal arm-locking. He knew Squints pretty well—and he was coming to know Lum Luckett very well indeed. And there was a gash on the back of Feathers' head, too, that trickled blood.

There were four or five hard-faced gentlemen beyond Lum. They seemed at once very yearningful to do something or other—and strangely hesitant about doing it! Slate thought that there must be some reason for this odd restraint of theirs. He looked to the right—and found Chihuahua's sardonic face above the bar. Chihuahua leaned upon the bar-top from behind it and with one hand twisted the spike points of his little mustache and beamed upon the hard-faced gentry.

Slate observed that before Chihuahua lay a sawed-off shotgun that must have come from under the bar. He observed also—as, doubtless, those eager and restrained gentlemen had done—that it was the left hand with which Chihuahua caressed his mustache. It was too much for Slate—he began to laugh.

"*Pues,* she's one ver' lovely—*half* of them fight," Chihuahua the expert witness nodded. "Me, I'm hope for one minute we will see the whole fight. But—w'at the hell! These fella w'at wear them Pitchfork brand, they're not care for much fight, w'en she's ni-ice an' fair an' square."

He looked smilingly at those hard-faced and quiet ones. They glowered at him; let

their eyes drop to the shotg[illegible]—then looked away. And then, Bill F[illegible]man stood up unsteadily.

"You don't think this ends anything?" he said in a level tone—the deadlier for being so controlled. "If you do—"

He turned and went toward the front door. He had to turn his head to one side, to bring his one usable eye to bear on the opening. But Slate, watching him somehow found nothing funny about Fryman's exit. He was a sure-thing gambler, that big one. He would back down—as he had once done before Chihuahua's carbine; he would shift and turn and wait; but that patience made him only the more dangerous. Slate had an idea that he would hear more of Mr. Fryman and that shortly.

X

THERE was silence in the barroom after Fryman's going. Feathers Flint crawled to his knees, propped himself there for a moment and looked around. Then he got shakily erect and without a word or glance, lurched out after Fryman.

"Yuh might's well cut stick, too!" Lum Luckett decided for Squints Agee, freeing Squints' arm. "Yuh Pitchfowk hairpins are so long at trippin', yuh can try trippin away from this. An'—the's no *lawr* ag'inst yuh showin' up inside my line o' sight ag'in. None a-tall. But the's what I'd call a right xerophilous *reason.*"

"Ye think so, huh?" Squints snarled. "We'll show ye a few before we're done. Ye just wait!"

He followed Feathers out and, one by one, the hard-faced gentlemen who had been desirous of interfering, but had been able to check their eagerness, went also. Slate had an idea—born of the remarks made by Fryman and his hired hands. He conveyed it in low tones to Chihuahua and Lum Luckett. Chihuahua nodded, whistling thoughtfully. He and Lum drifted out without ostentation—to investigate the goings and the doings of the Pitchfork men. It was quite possible, Slate had thought, that the three worthies, plus their friends in Yucca, might be staging a bushwhacking on the road out of town.

"For they won't be likely to try anything in town. I'd more likely suspect 'em o' waitin' behind a rock, to smack us [illegible] an' safe. If they have done that, ther[illegible]ey better be wavin' their rabbit foot wher[illegible] Chihuahua an' Lum hunt 'em up—an' w[illegible] the three o' us walk up behind '[illegible]'m sick an' tired o' this monkev[illegible]ss. If there has to be shootin' t[illegible]a man run cows in the Yucca coun[illegible], then, *por dios!* I'm goin' to be doin'[illegible]e o' that shootin'. I'm a mind to go [illegible] Bertie Drain a few. I wonder where Bertie is, right now. . . ."

"Stick yo' hands up!" Bert Drain cried in a thin voice, as if in answer to Slate's mental question. "Stick 'em up an' don't yuh try no blazers, neither! These guns is loaded with Blue Whistlers an' they'll sho' let the daylight shine through yuh plenty, if I was to haul on the triggers!"

"Why, there's Bertie, now!" Slate said aloud. He elevated his hands promptly before he turned.

Bert Drain and the Office-Shadow—Low Pockets Neese—were standing just inside the barroom's rear door. They had each a double-barreled shotgun and they looked so nervous that Slate grew openly and honestly alarmed.

"Hey, don't you be so restless with the cannons!" he cried. "I'm not resistin' a thing, so there's no sense to all that wigglin'. What d'you want, son?"

"Don't want nothin'!" Bert yapped angrily, for that "son" stung. "I *got* what I come after—you!"

"Yeh? An' then what— Quit wigglin' that gun thataway. If yo' blame' hand's got to shake like you had epileptic fits, have one o' the boys hold that thing for you!"

"Yuh're goin' to jail! Disturbin' the peace; assault an' battery; carryin' concealed weapons. . . ."

"Well, le's go, then. Now, I'll lock my hands behind my head to show the good faith an' righteous idees that're burnin' me up. So you can point yo' hardware to the ceilin', Bertie. I swear I do'no' when I been scareder. First thing you know you'll be shootin' me—or somebody behind you—or yo'self. An' it'd be *serious* if you should hurt anybody but yo'self."

SLATE grinned as he marched along Yucca's streets on the way to jail—but he was not feeling particularly cheer-

ful. He told himself that it was hard ... for a grown man to be collared by su... as Bertie. He consoled himself a bit ...v th...king of what he would do to Bertie ...very day or so, during the next two or thre... ...rs. That would be after he personally ... it that Bertie was kicked out of the shri... honors and dignity. Then —he cursed un... breath and his face grew red as his hair.

For Margery Free ...s standing on the veranda of Columbus Cleevy's rival in the storekeeping line—Dunc' Stovall. She stared at him; stared at Bertie; then abruptly she laughed. Slate went on by her without looking at her. Bertie explained the situation all over again and she laughed.

Down at the end of the veranda, well past her, Slate saw suddenly a gnarled and bent and bowlegged man who looked old, but not in the least decrepit. It was the first time since he had left home on his wanderings that he had seen "Dutch Oven" Derr. He would have wolf-howled at any time. Now, coming up to Derr, he flung his arms around the old fellow as in an excess of affectionate greeting. Derr would have looked surprised, Slate thought, but that his seamed and leathery old face with its icy blue eyes was not limber enough for expression.

"Grab my gun—under my shirt—hide it!" Slate grunted swiftly—and felt instantly an up-darting, tugging hand on his Colt-butt.

"Hey! Hey! Cut that out!" Bertie yelled instantly. "Yuh walk right on an' ne' mind all that! Dutch Oven Derr, yuh git away from my prisoner."

"A' right, sonny," nodded Derr. "I don't blame y' a mite for makin' the most o' this. Y' kind o' win double on this deal—y' git y' first pris'ner an' at the same time y' git to th'ow down on a boy that can lick y' for money, marbles or chalk. Y' wouldn't dast to come around him, without y' could sneak up behind him with a Greener. He'd make y' pull around a corner howlin' like a turpentined wolf, Slate would!"

HERDED around the corner to the little 'dobe jail, Slate was almost calm. But when he heard the barred inner door clang with a viciously triumphant sort of sound behind him, he sat down in the cleanest spot ... the floor and began to think. He was ...rtainly hog-tied!

Chihuahua an... Lum would not be look...ng for him for quite a while—not before morning, anyway. They would be too busy looking for a possible ambush of the Pitchfork men. They would think that he was on the same hunt. So . . .

He went carefully around the gloomy single room that was the jail. The 'dobe walls were more than four feet thick. The two windows were a foot square and set high in the walls—almost under the flat roof. The floor was of hand-hewn planks three inches thick. The door was barred by that wrought-iron inner gate. It was not going to be so easy to get out—when he had not so much as a pocket-knife and there was nothing in the place itself to use for tools.

He was looking speculatively at the roof —made of the same foot-wide, three-inch planks as the floor. When the outer door opened and he saw two figures standing there, in the thickening dusk. One was Bert Drain. The other . . .

"Well, they're certainly tryin' to keep me from payin' off the mortgage, Ab!" he said grimly. "Fryman an' this gang o' county-skunks. . . ."

In perfect silence, except for the jingling of his keys on great iron ring, Bert Drain unlocked the barred gate. Slate wondered what had brought Ab Diffy there. He didn't expect the old boy to come gloating; he wouldn't take the time or expend the effort. He never let his feelings trouble him.

Bert Drain, having unlocked the gate, turned away; went clear out of Slate's range of vision. Ab Diffy made a grunting sound that might have been interpreted as a summons. Slate, scowling a little, moved over to stand before him. Still, he could not see Drain. Ab was standing aside, too. . . .

"I fixed this up with Judge Cleevy," Ab Diffy grunted. "Go get your horse. Get out of town."

"Fixed it with Cleevy! That old *tonto!*" Slate yelled. "Now—what ever got into you, to put out money that way?"

"I said—fixed it. Didn't *have* to put up money. I don't want the T2—with those thieves loose. No use to anybody. Couldn't get rid of it. And— And—" he hesitated;

an amazing thing for Ab Diffy—"you said you'd pay me on time; that you could fight on ninety-six dollars and sixty cents. From—what I've heard, you've made a good start at doing that. I'm not going to have your feet kicked out from under you—this way. Get out—and fight some more!"

He growled impatiently and waved off Slate's amazed efforts to thank him. So Slate shook his head dumbly and went to Migg's corral. Old Dutch Oven Derr rode out to the street as he came up; he was leading Midnight all saddled. He handed Slate both his Colts and the belts and holsters from the saddlebags.

"Le's go!" he grunted. "What I hear—plenty to do. Me'n' y' pa come to this country together—along with Ab Diffy. . . ."

XI

THEY saw a fire, off the road. A good-sized fire; obviously that of carefree men; men quite easy of mind and conscience. They rode up to it and Chihuahua yelled cheerfully at Slate:

"*Pues,* we're have them fi-ine time, Slate. *Por supuesto!* Most certainly. We're find them fella, Squints an' Feathers. We're dust them trail by their feet. W'at the hell! They're lose them spur in them horses' belly. They're . . ."

"Man, they high-tailed levorotatory!" Lum grinned. "Have a bean. Chihuahua just cooked 'em—but they ain't bad. Just keep a cup o' cawffee handy an' yuh'll be safe. I made the cawffee. Well? What's next?"

Slate introduced Dutch Oven to them and both parties to the introduction looked hard and straight and thoughtfully at each other—then nodded a bit. For these were three men who had the mintmark on them. It was plain to eyes like Chihuahua's and Lum's and grim, taciturn old Dutch Oven's.

"See Fryman?" Slate asked, around a mouthful of beans.

"Uh-uh. Nary sign o' him—except his hawse-tracks. Chihuahua found them. I reckon he went straight out. An' Squints an' Feathers—I was kind o' took back. They wasn't aimin' to bushwhack us, I don't believe. We just dusted 'em a few, for luck."

"She's go toward them Pitchfork, them fella," Chihuahua nodded. "Me, I'm like Lum; I'm think they're pull to ride an' wait. But they're go on."

"Knew they never needed to bushwhack me!" Slate said grimly. "Fryman had cooked her up with Bert Drain and Columbus Cleevy to slam me into a spell. I—wonder!"

He looked suddenly at Dutch Oven:

"I can't believe Fryman was just gettin' back at me for lickin' him. . . . He stands to be hoorahed a lot about siccin' the sher'f onto me after losin' out in fist-an'-skull. He's got more—I bet you!—in his head than just that. He's got a reason for wantin' me where the li'l' doggies can't bite me, for a while. Fellas! Come sun-up, we'll be squattin' in a li'l' motte o' cottonwoods I know about. Yessiree! At the north end o' the Pitchfork's Middle Pasture—the only good pasture the outfit owns."

THEY took turns at sleeping in a motte of cottonwoods, until dawn. Breakfast was a cold and coffeeless meal.

"Dangerous as kinesthesia—eatin' Chihuahua's beans like this, without my cawffee to kind o' dye-lute her," Lum said sadly. "Hey! Quit it! They hurt worse outside than they do in—them beans o' yo's, Chihuahua!"

Both Dutch Oven and Chihuahua had binoculars. They raked the open around the cottonwoods. There were cattle grazing, down near the river in the scattered brush. Nor could they find trace of any *vaqueros.* So they rode south and came quietly to a bunch of forty-odd aged cows, all wearing the Pitchfork brand—a clean, obviously original, iron.

"Some o' the stuff he bought with the outfit, I reckon," Slade said disappointedly. "Let's cut east an' west. Stay separated an hour or so, then come back to about here."

He and Dutch Oven turned west; Chihuahua and Lum rode east. Slate puzzled the business of the rustling. Always the trails had led over the border—during his time on the T2, anyway. He could only guess whether or not stock stolen during his father's lifetime had gone the same way. That would mean, ordinarily, that T2 stuff was disposed of in the interior

of Mexico; or was driven far to east or west and brought in again as imported Mex' cattle; or, perhaps, was traded in Mexico for genuine Mex' stuff and the latter brought across for shipment.

None of these methods would make it very hard for him to find either T2 cattle or trace of the thieves and handlers. The only thing that made him in the least hopeful of finding anything was memory of that Three Lilies cow they had found.

THEY rode silently through the thickening brush. This was the fringe of the real bosque that bordered the river. It was hard to see more than twenty feet ahead. Dutch Oven suddenly reined in and sat rigid in his old Mexican saddle, head pushed forward like an alarmed turtle. His ears were better than Slate's. It was thirty seconds later that the younger man also heard the soft beat of a slowly ridden horse's hoofs. They reined back noiselessly behind a great clump of mesquite and ocatilla and slid hands down their animals' noses.

It was a Mex' rider on a scrubby, knock-kneed little pony. Slate saw him through the leafy screen at which he had his eye. Quickly, but noiselessly, he moved his rope, where it was hanging over the horn. He dropped a large loop and when the Mexican, all unsuspicious of their presence, came even with the mesquite, Slate whirled the loop once to clear it, then flicked it over the *vaquero's* head, rammed in the hooks and Midnight lunged to the side. The Mexican came off his pony as Slate had come out of Midnight's saddle beyond the river.

They bent over him and he looked stolidly up at them. He shrugged and shrugged again in answer to their questions. So Dutch Oven began certain preparations. He got a tin can from his saddle-pocket. He put pebbles in it and tied it to the tail of the *vaquero's* pony. He lashed the fellow's hands behind his back. He loosened the lariat from Slate's saddle-horn and bent it to the thick horn of the *vaquero's* saddle. He changed the loop on the man's neck; slipped it down under one arm, also. Then he tied the loop in a hard Spanish knot and looked thoughtfully upon his handiwork. He turned quietly to Slate:

"*Mira!* Look! I shake the can once. The pony, frightened by the noise, begins to run. This stubborn and silent one, then, is dragged. The can will rattle at every jump of the pony and he will go faster and faster. He will never stop until his heart bursts—and by that time, this that is now a man will be—something that a butcher throws away; faceless; perhaps armless; battered and scratched and skinless."

He went on in Spanish to describe some men he had seen who had been given the penalty of The Drag. The *vaquero* watched him fascinatedly. Slate nodded with interested expression. Dutch Oven moved to the *vaquero's* side and with a gruesome sort of care turned the man two inches to the left and sighted along the lariat. He went to the pony's head and moved him a little, until the animal pointed down a sort of lane between the clumps of brush. Then he came back and reached for the can of rocks. . . .

"There are four beside me, who ride herd in this pasture!" the *vaquero* cried. "We hold many cattle down here by the river. Yes! There were more men, yesterday, but three went to the house to break horses at the home-corrals. Two—I do not know where they went. They rode away to the east. One came with an order."

"What does He-of-the-Twisted-Neck wish with these newly broken horses?" Slate asked with deadly evenness.

"Why—why—these horses, señor, are broken for our *patron*—the Señor Fryman! That— That one of whom you speak, he is not of the Pitchfork. He is—well, I believe that he is of whatever he chooses. I have seen him once, riding across this southern range toward the ford into Mexico; like—like some evil dead one refused a bed in *el campo santo*—the burying ground. I know little of him. The other men may know much, but they do not speak of him. It is—bad luck!"

THE cows—he went on now that he had decided to talk at all—were Three Lilies. They had come out of Mexico. *Seguramente!* From far in the interior somewhere. Had he not gone over by order of the Señor Fryman, with others, to take the herds from those riders who

had brought them north? Twice, three times, he had gone over ar helped drive the cattle across the river this pasture, where they were held very secretly—for fear of thieves.

"Pues, you're find more than we're find!" Chihuahua grinned—appearing with his usual lack of warning. Lum was twenty yards behind him. They listened to Slate's brief explanation.

"Who is on this side?" Slate asked, of the *vaquero.* "Suppose that we should ride to the edge of the cattle and look at a few of them. Would any of your fellows see us? *Momentito!* Do not answer too quickly. Remember that, if any does, in that moment you die so quickly that your nose will bleed from bumping against the gate of purgatory!"

"I think that if you ride straight west, none will see you. If you do not alarm the cattle and so, the other men."

They took him along with his feet tied under his pony's belly, riding beside Chihuahua, who did sleight-of-hand with his knife and talked to it as to a person. They came presently to a chunky red steer wearing the Three Lilies iron. Dutch Oven promptly roped this animal and threw it. He dropped off and went over to study the brand.

"Might' nigh certain she's y' T2, blotted. But le's look at some more."

Four others were roped and inspected critically. Dutch Oven shrugged, bit off a huge chew of Star Navy and worked his lantern jaws reflectively.

"I'd go before any co't in the world an' swear it: Ever' one o' these-yere critters is y' T2 stuff, blotted as neat as ever I see a job done, to this-yere *Très Lirios* nobody every hear' tell of! Look at their ears, too! I tol' y' pa a million times that a good job o' half-croppin' them split ears could be done—good enough to fool most anybody. A' right Yere 't is!"

They made the *vaquero* their guide and skirted the herd to northward. They found two of the *vaqueros* drawn together and Chihuahua, Lum and Slate began to stalk them, while Dutch Oven and their prisoner rode boldly toward the men, the *vaquero* waving at his fellows. They stared. Brown hands slipped down to carbine-stocks at sight of Dutch Oven.

The riders were so engrossed with these two that the others came, low in the saddle, behind them without being observed. Th Pitchfork men saw the thongs that their companion's ankles and were sl ing their Winchesters from the scabbards wh Chihuahua yelled behind them. y whirled—and Dutch Oven je p his long .45-90. They made no pt, then, to fight. They were di ed and then all rode in a compact oup to find the other men.

The third encountered was a simple soul. He sat his horse with hands folded on the horn and watched them come up. Slate darted out and covered him. The fellow's hands went skyward. With him, they went on farther south. But the fourth *vaquero* was a nervous and a suspicious soul. Or there may have been something telltale about the odd gathering of Mex' and white.

He whirled his horse and dodged behind a bush. Slate and Chihuahua went after him, leaving Dutch Oven and Lum to guard their prisoners. The *vaquero* went straight for the river and plunged down the bank. Chihuahua dropped his horse as it surged up the far side. But the *vaquero* rolled over, unhurt, and got to cover.

They started the cattle to the east; back toward the T2. The Mexicans had food and captors and captives ate, when the *Très Lirios* animals were moving slowly forward. Dutch Oven constituted himself the guard. The others did the riding. Slate grinned at his companions.

"One busted cowman comes back! There's plenty stuff there. If you-all think you can keep 'em going for a while, I'll head for the Lazy-F an' see if Givadam's got back. If I tell him Dutch Oven says this stuff is mine, Givadam'll believe it. An' I can borrow some help to push the herd on."

XII

IT was getting near to sundown when he came to the county road—near where it angled off to eastward around the Lazy-F pastures. He reined in and looked around. There was a cloud of dust coming from the direction of the Lazy-F. He waited curiously to see who came splitting the breeze so.

It was that ancient of ancients, Secundino, cook at the Lazy-F since the memory of man could stretch backward. He was on a barebacked horse and when he pulled in abruptly, he fell off. Slate caught the rope that was twisted into a hackamore around the animal's nose and Secudino stood up, powdered with dust. He scrambled to Slate's stirrup, eyes blazing.

"*Mi muchachita—la señorita*—the Devil-with-the-Twisted-Neck!" he gasped. "Gone—with that gang of murderers who cut the throat of Jaimecito my cousin's son. . . ."

"Gone—who's gone?" Slate snarled at him, bending to peer into the ancient, quivering face. "Not—not Margery! Where?"

"*Sí, sí sí!* Margery! The *patron* has not come back from over the river. These rode up, two hours ago. The Devil whose neck is twisted so that he looks behind him, he was leading them. Six in all. Cutthroats; thieves; every one of them. This *diablo* who led them, he said to cut every throat on the ranch. But the girl he had hauled out and put on her horse. *I* ran out of my kitchen and behind the windmill tank. When they were gone, I caught this horse and now I ride for the Pitchfork, to get the help of the Señor Fryman—who loves *la señorita*. Pedro, who also ran and got away, he has ridden for Yucca and help."

Slate breathed noisily between his teeth. That devil—he hated Givadam only less than he had hated Wolf Wyndam. He knew that he could strike no blow at old Givadam that would hurt like this! But—where had he gone? Where could he have gone? To the 'dobe in the bosque, across the river? It was all-important to know this. There was so little time—so little—If Margery were to be helped— But he would not let himself think of the girl. He snapped questions at Secundino and the old man shrugged. He could only repeat what he had said before—the gang had struck swiftly; within twenty minutes of time of arrival, they were in the saddle again, with Margery between two riders, gone into the south with such portable valuables as the men could snatch up and put behind them.

"I have three good men south of here!" Slate said grimly. "Come you with me, Secundino. It would be useless to ride to the Pitchfork. If we cannot do anything—neither could Fryman. Bang that animal and ride, my friend! We go fast."

THEY whirled south and rode for two miles. Dusk was all that worried Slate at this minute. Chihuahua might be able to pick up the trail, if only Midnight could get him back to the big breed before it grew too dark. Then he saw the trail of several horses, crossing their course—heading westward. He threw himself out of the saddle and bent.

"How many did you say?" he yelled at Secundino. "Secundino! Ride as if the devil sat upon your *caballo* behind you! Ride to the south. To where my three friends drive a herd of cattle eastward. Tell them to leave everything. To let their prisoners go. To come to—" he lifted his head and stared along the trail "—to the Pitchfork house! Go!"

He was back on Midnight and spurring on before Secundino had turned his horse. He went on, looking sometimes ahead of him, but more often staring down at the trail, for fear that it might vanish. It was leading straight for the Pitchfork's house. Now, what might that mean? A blow at Fryman, too? Not likely. . . . Not when one remembered those Three Lilies animals!

Darkness came. After a while, Midnight lifted his weary head and would have whinnied, but Slate caught his nose. At the crest of a rise, he saw the yellow windows of the house two hundred yards or so beyond. He pulled in to a walk and went softly forward.

He saw the long bulk of the men's quarters, with lights inside. Then the larger shape of the house, with four or five windows showing lamplight behind them. He dropped off of Midnight and let the reins fall. Almost crouching, he went forward on tiptoe. A door opened in the men's quarters. Two men came out—and to one side of them a big shape slid away into the darkness. They did not see it, but Slate did. He wondered who that might be. The men went back inside at someone's call.

Slate slid over to the house-wall and looked through a window. He saw Fryman's big figure instantly—then he saw Margery, who was in Fryman's arms. He was patting her shoulder, reassuringly.

Slate was tremendously relieved at sight of her—then— She was so at ease there, leaning against Fryman. . . .

"Don't worry!" he could hear Fryman say dimly. "I'll fix everything. You're perfectly safe, now."

But when he let her go and moved toward a door into the hall, he seemed to stiffen before he opened it. He hitched up the Colt that swung at his left side, butt-front. He looked like a man who expected trouble. Slate wondered. . . .

HE was tempted to speak to Margery. But instead, he went softly around the house and found the back door open. He heard someone moving about in the kitchen to the right of the door. But he slid inside, none the less. He got past the door of the kitchen without being seen by the fat Mexican woman working there. He went along a dark passage to where a line of light showed under a door. He put his ear to the wood.

"You'll not do it!" he heard Fryman say flatly—but with a shade of nervousness, too. "I've stood everything else, but I'm not going to stand this."

"No?" That was a voice Slate would have recognized in ten thousand. "What makes you think you won't? That you can help yourself? Have you forgotten the ways I have for enforcing my orders? Do you think that, because you happen to be my nephew, you can disobey? Now, go before you get into trouble! I tell you that I am going to make her father curse the day he saw Sonora! She goes to Mexico and the men draw lots for her. I will see that Givadam Free knows what became of her—but he will never see her again. Now, go!"

"I won't! No Mexican is going to have her. *Nobody* is going to have her—while I'm alive! I have been thinking of marrying her. Now, I'll do one of two things: Go back to Sonora and take her—or settle down here as a respectable rancher—buy the T2 from Ab Diffy and marry her."

"Marry her? What of Carmen, your little half-breed wife? Do you think . . ."

"I think that nobody will say anything about Carmen! I . . ."

"Go! I'm tired of listening to you! You will do precisely as I say—as everyone else will. Else . . ."

"She's mine!" Fryman snarled at him. "I've done as you said all my life. But not now. No Mexican gets her."

It seemed to Slate that only these two were in the room. He guessed that the men were down in the quarters. So he lifted the latch of the door before him and pushed it open. He came into the room with a Colt in each hand, in the gunman's crouch. Then, he saw that he had been mistaken. For there were two men squatting, one on each side of the chair in which The-Man-with-the-Twisted-Neck was sitting. Each had a rifle across his knees. Stolidly, they watched Bill Fryman.

"Kill him!" the leader snarled at his guards. "Fools without eyes! Kill him—in the door, there!"

Slate fired flashingly at the man on the twisted one's right. The other guard was shielded by the chair. A rifle bullet fanned his face and thudded into the door behind him. Then there was the roaring of a Colt as he flung himself down. That was Fryman—and the door at the other end of the room was opening. Fryman was blazing away at him. Slate turned his Colt a trifle and whanged away at Fryman; saw him stagger.

The other guard had stood up and was lifting his Winchester over the head of The-Man-with-the-Twisted-Neck. A huge, indistinct shape lumbered over from the other door. Glaring that way—and shooting little side-glances at Fryman, who was swaying, with hands at his sides—Slate saw a face that was like a man ape's, at the guard's shoulder. Suddenly, the guard cried out. That huge man had him by one shoulder and the head. There was a twist and a dull snap and the guard collapsed.

The-Man-with-the-Twisted-Neck turned his whole trunk in the chair to see. His hand moved; there was the rat-tat-tat of shots fired flashingly from a light-calibered pistol. The big apish man—a Mexican; tremendously tall and wide—shivered. The shots ceased. The-Man-with-the-Twisted-Neck eyed his victim steadily. Then the huge hands came up. There was something horrible and machine-like about the step the big man took toward the chair. The hands caught the shoulder and the head.

THE - Man - with - the - Twisted - Neck screamed shrilly. It was a fearful sou[illegible]—that ended as if cut in two. For split-second, the killer looked down, then [illegible]rashed forward to the floor. He twit[illegible]nce or twice, then was still.

Slate [illegible] running feet—toward the door throug[illegible]hich the huge killer had come. Dark, [illegible] faces showed in the opening—and disa[illegible]red under the rain of lead from Slate's [illegible]t-hand gun. He wriggled forward and snatched up a Winchester; went to the door. There was a man lying on its sill. Outside was the yard and three men running toward the lighted quarters. Slate pumped slugs at them; dropped one. Another fell at the very door of the quarters. The third got inside.

While he crouched in the doorway, he heard noises from the corrals. They were followed quickly by the sound of galloping hoofs. He considered—the men who had ridden away from the Lazy-F were all accounted for. That would leave only the *vaqueros* of the Pitchfork, who might or might not have direct connection with the gang of the outlaw-leader. He thought that he might take it for granted that they had ridden off from the fight—along with that surviving member of the gang.

The - Man - with-the-Twisted-Neck was very dead. So was the great killer at his feet. And Slate, seeing upon the bare back of this huge figure welts that criss-crossed it, suddenly recalled the leader's threat to punish The Twister. It fitted in; The Twister had been terribly beaten—and this was his revenge.

Fryman lay dead, also. Slate shook his head. It had all come so swiftly. . . . He knocked at the door of the room which held Margery. There was no answer, so he opened the door and went in.

"'S all right, honey!" he told her. "We're goin' home, now. Ever'thing's fixed. There— There was some shootin'. They got to drillin' each other—Fryman an' his thief-killer uncle an' the gang. If there's an honest head o' stock on the Pitchfork, I reckon it belongs to Fryman's wife down in Sonora."

"His—wife?" she cried, staring at Slate. "Why—he—"

"Yeh, I know! I know! But he left his wife down [illegible]n Sonora an' come along with his crazy [illegible]ncle, to get revenge on Dad an' yo' pa. [illegible]e was the cover on this s.de, you see. All my stolen stuff was held in his pastures. I reckon they sold a good deal they stole durin' Dad's time. But she's all settled down, now an'— After I pay off Ab Diffy, I'll still have some stuff. An' then—"

He looked at her; took a step toward her. And—

"Hey, Slate! She's me! An' Lum an' Dutch Oven! Me, I'm think mabbeso you're shoot for them door, so I'm holler. She's one ni-ice cleanin' up, w'at the hell!"

HE looked thoughtfully from Slate to the girl—and back again. Lum Luckett strolled in. He made a gesture toward Slate, who instinctively lifted his hand. A roll of something slapped into his palm. He gaped at it—paper money; large bills.

"I don't like that sher'f's looks none. So when I found this-yere in that killer's pocket—the twisted neck one's—I figgered it better git to its owner right away or else it'd disappear clean—clean—*xylotomous!* Yeh! Better'n six thousand but yuh've lost more cows than that."

"I reckon we better go out an' kind o'—sweep up the mess," Slate said uncertainly.

"But you—you can wait a minute or two, can't you?" Margery said hesitantly. "You boys go right ahead and Slate . . ."

She looked at the floor. Slate stared at her.

"They—interrupted you, you know," she said in a small voice.

"I thought you liked Fryman."

"I did! I liked him. But—I didn't love him. He—never dipped my pig-tail ends into the inkwell; or—"

"My goodness!" cried Slate. He scooped her to him and they were standing there, utterly forgetful of everything when the door burst open to the accompaniment of a terrific roaring sound.

"What's all this?" roared Givadam Free.

"We were thinking about somethin'," Slate said meekly. "I—I hope you don't give a dam'?"

"I don't? I don't? I certainly do—I give a dam' more'n I have done about anything in years. Put her there, son!"

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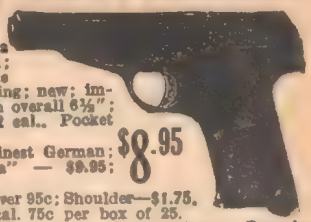

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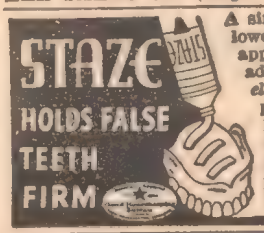

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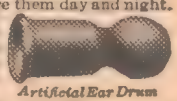

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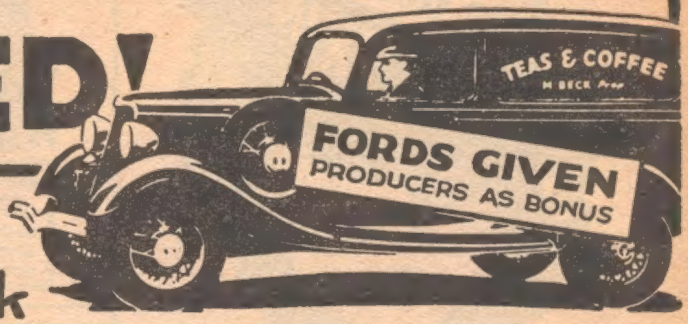

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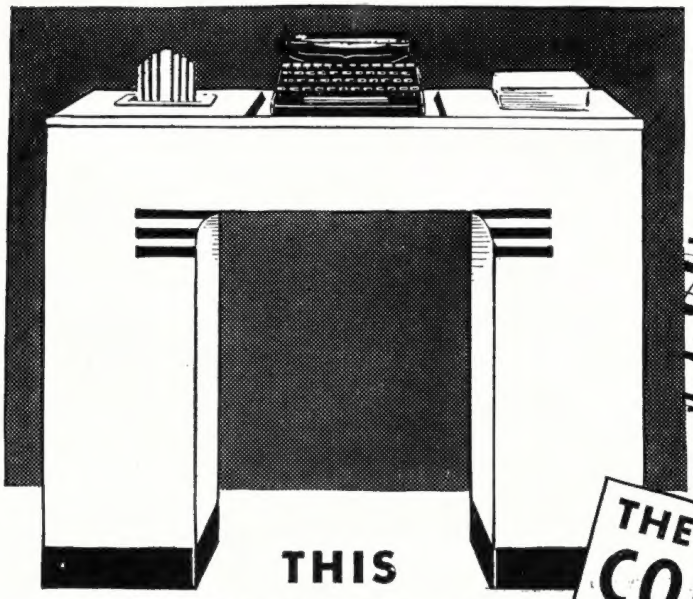

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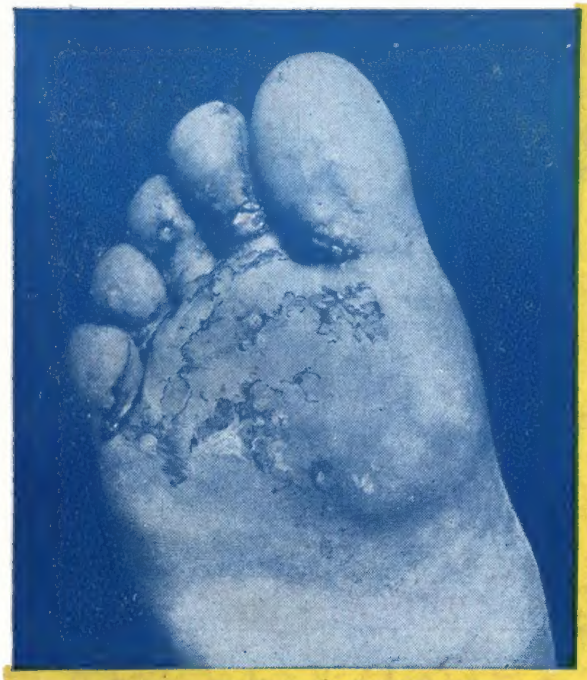

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

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According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

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